

Vol. LXVII, No. 4

\$3.95 U.S. / \$4.75 Can. / £1.95 U.K.

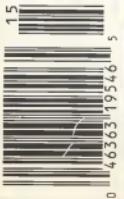
The World's Oldest Science Fiction Magazine

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STORIES



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Phillip C. Jennings
John Morressy

Paul Di Filippo
Ian McDowell

Frank Shatwell



Night Masks,

R. A. Salvatore's New Thriller

Danger Lurks in the Shadows

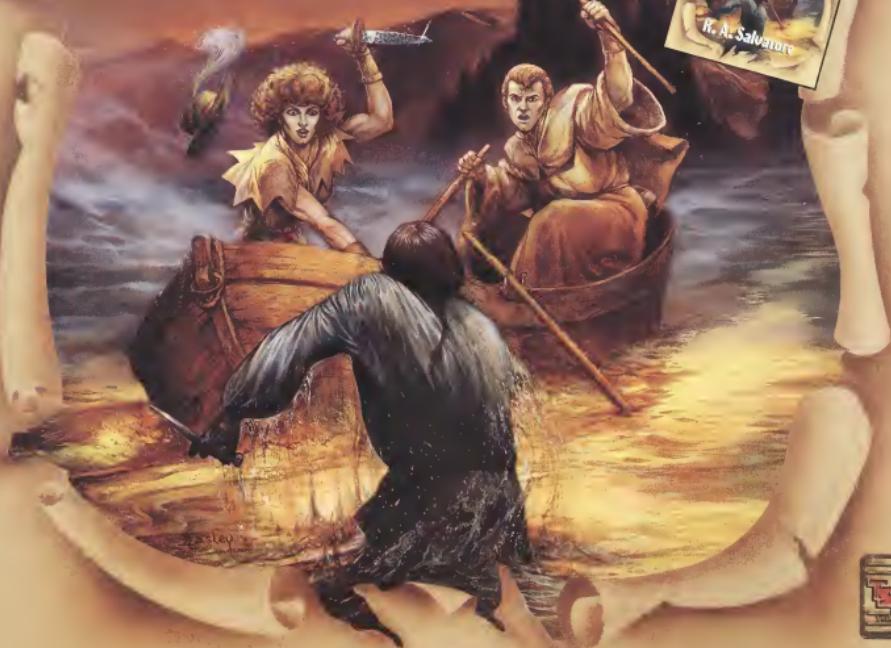
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AMAZING® Stories (ISSN 1058-0751) is published monthly by TSR, Inc., P. O. Box 111 [201 Sheridan Springs Road], Lake Geneva, WI 53147.

Subscriptions: The price of a subscription is \$30 for 12 issues [one year] sent to U.S. or Canadian addresses. For subscriptions sent to all other countries, the rates are \$50 for surface mail or \$90 for air mail. **Note:** All subscriptions must be paid in advance in U.S. funds only. Prices are subject to change without notice. All subscription orders should be sent to TSR, Inc., P. O. Box 5695, Boston MA 02206.

Distribution: Random House and its affiliate companies have worldwide distribution rights in the book trade for English language products. Distributed to the book and hobby trade in the United Kingdom by TSR Ltd.

Submissions: AMAZING Stories welcomes unsolicited submissions of fiction manuscripts. Guidelines for fiction writers are available by sending a #10 SASE to the Lake Geneva address. Illustrators and writers of nonfiction should query first and provide samples of published work.

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Second class postage paid at Lake Geneva, Wis., and additional mailing offices Postmaster: Send address changes to TSR, Inc., P.O. Box 111, Lake Geneva WI 53147.

I Really Don't Get It

Kim Mohan

When we turn down a manuscript submission, we usually try to deliver the bad news in a way that's meant to be considerate and helpful. Instead of just trotting out the standard editor-type phrases ("not right for us," "doesn't meet our needs," blah blah blah), we make a point of customizing every letter that goes out of here. When a writer gets his or her story returned, it comes back along with some amount of personalized criticism.

We—all three of us—do this not because we're trying to set ourselves up as Ultimate Authorities on the art and craft of short-story writing, and not because we take any perverse pleasure in twisting the knife once we've stuck it in. We don't see it as knife-twisting at all; quite the opposite, in fact. What we're trying to do is help every writer understand why this particular piece of work is not of publishable quality, at least as far as this magazine is concerned.

And, like it says in our guidelines, any writer is "perfectly free to crumple up the critique and throw it away; no one's trying to tell you that you absolutely must do certain things differently in order to sell your work. All we're trying to do is explain why the story you've showed us is not right for the magazine you've sent it to."

But no matter how much you soften a blow, it's still a blow—apparently in some cases, too much of a blow for someone to absorb without wanting to strike back. Once in

a while we get a letter back from a writer who feels obliged to react to our criticism in an attitude that can range from haughtiness to mild indignation to absolute outrage.

I can imagine two reasons why someone might be compelled to write a letter of rebuttal after getting one of our critiques. The first one's actually more of a theory: I think some people use the act of arguing with an editor's decision as a sort of catharsis; they get the bad feelings out of their system by barking back at the source of their distress (otherwise known as "killing the courier").

The second one is a known fact: Sometimes, certainly more often than we realize, we make mistakes. When I make an error in judgment because of a lack of knowledge or a failure to perceive what a writer was trying to do, I appreciate finding out about it. Set me straight on a point where I goofed, and I'll be grateful; the new information might change my impression of your story, and at least it will prevent me from making the same mistake if that point crops up in a different manuscript.

We do make mistakes, more often than we realize . . . but *not* as often as some people would have us believe. There's a certain type of rebuttal letter that irritates me, and which I refuse to be affected by for any longer than it takes me to read it once. It's centered around the argument that (in typical phraseology) "you [*i.e.*] obviously didn't get the point of the story." No specific ex-

amples of spots where I failed to pick up on something, little or no explanation of what the point of the story was (as if I should be able to figure it out for myself *now*, when the manuscript is no longer in front of me)—just a broad-based diatribe that takes me to task for not having enough intelligence, or perceptiveness, or whatever it takes, to do my job properly.

If I was inclined to write rebuttals of rebuttals, what I would tell writers like these goes something like this:

"Did it cross your mind that *you* might be at least partly responsible for my inability to understand what your story was about? If I didn't 'get it,' then maybe a lot of other people who tried to read that story wouldn't get it either. Maybe the problem is not entirely with my perception but also has something to do with the way in which you express yourself.

"If the letter of rebuttal you sent me is any indication of your ability to make yourself clear, then the best thing you can do for yourself is take two giant steps backward and try to look objectively at what you're creating. The criticism I gave you was an honest appraisal of the way your story impressed me, and it does you no good to turn that criticism back on me without addressing the possibility that there was a good reason *why* I didn't 'get it.' All you've done is bewilder me even more; when someone refuses to accept criticism in the spirit in which it was given, then I *really* don't get it." ♦

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

While Gulliver is visiting the kingdom of Luggnagg, he is asked by a member of the royal court whether he has seen any of their "Struldbrugs, or *Immortals*. I said I had not, and desired he would explain to me what he meant by such an appellation applied to a mortal creature. He told me, that sometimes, though very rarely, a child happened to be born in a family with a red circular spot in the forehead, directly over the left eyebrow, which was an infallible mark that it should never die. The spot, as he described it, was about the compass of a silver threepence, but in the course of time grew larger, and changed its color; for at twelve years old it became green, so continued till five and twenty, then turned to a deep blue; at five and forty it grew coal black, and as large as an English shilling, but never admitted any further alteration. He said these births were so rare, that he did not believe there could be above eleven hundred struldbrugs of both sexes in the whole kingdom. . . ."

Gulliver at once cried out, "Happy nation where every child hath at least a chance for being immortal! Happy people who enjoy so many living examples of ancient virtue, and have masters ready to instruct them in the wisdom of all former ages! But happiest beyond all comparison are those excellent struldbrugs, who being born exempt from that universal calamity of human nature, have their minds free and dis-

engaged, without the weight and depression of spirits caused by the continual apprehension of death."

If he had been so lucky to be born a *struldbrug*, Gulliver told himself, he would have devoted the first two hundred years of his life to amassing great wealth and mastering all the arts and sciences; and then he would spend the rest of eternity serving as "the oracle of the nation," "forming and directing the minds of hopeful young men," and engaging in lofty philosophical colloquies with a set of companions chosen from his own immortal brotherhood. But why, he wondered, were none of these wise beings present at the court, sharing the wisdom of their great age with the king? Perhaps they found the court too vulgar and hectic a place, and passed their time in some more rarefied abode.

But reality, as usual, failed to match Gulliver's lofty fantasy. The *struldbrugs*, he was told, were indeed exempt from death—but not from aging. By the time they reached eighty, "they had not only all the follies and infirmities of other older men, but many more which arose from the dreadful prospect of never dying. They were not only opinionative, peevish, covetous, morose, vain, talkative, but incapable of friendship, and dead to all natural affection. . . . Envy and impotent desires are their prevailing passions. . . . At ninety they lose their teeth and hair, they have at that age no distinction of taste, but eat and drink

whatever they can get, without relish or appetite. The diseases they were subject to still continue without increasing or diminishing. In talking they forget the common appellation of things, and the names of persons, even of those who are their nearest friends and relations. For the same reason they never can amuse themselves with reading, because their memory will not serve to carry them from the beginning of a sentence to the end." Because of the changes that time works in all languages, they become unable, after a few hundred years, to communicate with anyone but their own kind.

Eventually Gulliver meets a few *struldbrugs*, and is appalled by their hideous appearance and the misery of their condition: "The reader will easily believe, that from what I had heard and seen, my keen appetite for the perpetuity of life was much abated. I grew heartily ashamed of the pleasing visions I had formed, and thought no tyrant could invent a death into which I would not run with pleasure from such a life." The *struldbrugs* are one of the most terrifying inventions of Jonathan Swift's classic novel—which is surely one of the masterpieces of science fiction.

But when we turn from *Gulliver's Travels* to yesterday's newspaper we find life imitating fiction; for here is the case of eighty-five-year-old John Kingery of Portland, Oregon, who was abandoned in his wheelchair at a dog racing track in Post Falls, Idaho, wearing bedroom slippers and a

sweatshirt that said "Proud to be An American." In his hands he held a bag of diapers. A note pinned to his chest said that his name was "John King" and that he was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. As was true of Gulliver's *struldbrugs*, he was able to reminisce about his youth, and to speak amiably about farms and farming, but he could not remember his name or where he came from. Eventually he was identified by administrators of a Portland nursing home, who recognized him from a photo in the paper, and he was flown back to Oregon clutching a teddy bear in his hand, utterly unaware of what was going on around him.

John Kingery's daughter had checked him out of his nursing home about ten hours before he was found in Idaho. Presumably his family could no longer bear the strain or financial burden of caring for him. "Granny dumping" is what this is called, according to a spokesman for the American Association of Retired Persons, who also says, "Not a day goes by when a hospital emergency room somewhere in America doesn't have a case where some elderly person has been abandoned, usually by the children." And a survey by the American College of Emergency Physicians found that some 70,000 people were abandoned in this manner during 1991.

It does not appear to be against the law in Idaho to abandon an elderly person unable to care for himself, though it is in Oregon. Abandoning dogs or children, though, is illegal in Idaho.

So we have *struldbrugs* of our own. They are an enormous problem for their families. And—in an era of constant medical advances—

their number is increasing all the time.

Consider a case that strikes closer to home for me than that of John Kingery. My wife Karen's grandmother is ninety-two years old. She lives in a retirement home in Florida; her daughter lives nearby and visits her frequently. For the past decade the old woman has been in a steady mental and physical decline, to the point where she seemed barely aware of her surroundings. Early in 1992 it became apparent that she would not live much longer. Her family thought it best to transfer her from the retirement home to a nearby hospital, where she would receive whatever specialized care she might require during the last few weeks of her life.

No abandonment was practiced here. Karen's mother has been a model of daughterly concern during her mother's long descent into old age. On checking her into the hospital, though, she suggested to the hospital authorities that her mother's comfort ought to be made a higher priority than her mother's continued survival. Care for her, yes; but not to the point where the old woman's mere husk was being sustained in some weird kind of mechanical quasi-life.

"Oh, no," the hospital authorities replied. "We can't take her on that basis. We'll make every effort to keep her alive indefinitely, and if that's not acceptable to you, take her to some other hospital."

Yes, of course. The Hippocratic Oath, to which all medical practitioners for the past twenty-five centuries have subscribed, declares, "The regimen I adopt shall be for the benefit of my patients according to my ability and judgment, and not

for their hurt or for any wrong. I will give no deadly drug to any, though it be asked for me. . . ." An honorable philosophy; but note also the admonition of the nineteenth-century poet Arthur Hugh Clough:

Thou shalt not kill; but needst not strive

Officially to keep alive.

Karen's grandmother, supported by all the formidable technology of 1990's medicine, has now (as of this writing, early April) spent three months in the hospital where she was supposed to have died within a matter of days. She weighs seventy-five pounds; she has little notion of where she is; in her last rational statement she indicated that she was quite willing to see her long life come to its end. But daily miracles are performed to prevent that. The cost of all that is formidable. The taxpayers—you—are paying it. To the hospital, Karen's grandmother is a valuable asset, a productive profit center. Small wonder that the doctors strive to keep her alive.

Over the next thirty years, there will be a quintupling of the number of Americans over the age of eighty-five—to a total of fifteen million. In the same period the number of Alzheimer's disease victims is expected to triple, reaching twelve million by the year 2020.

Gulliver's Luggnagg, a small kingdom, had only eleven hundred *struldbrugs*. We are the mightiest nation on Earth and we do everything on a much grander scale. But sometimes—all too often, it seems—it becomes necessary to ask if we really understand the implications of some of the things we do. The times cry out for a successor to Jonathan Swift. ♦

Vol. LXVI, No. 11

The World's Oldest

Science Fiction Magazine

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Letters

I eagerly read your editorial "Why No Poetry?" in the May 1992 issue. I was not impressed. Okay, I'll give you *one* point for your not being convinced that readers are clamoring for poetry. But your argument against using poetry because you wanted a clean look to the graphic and typographic design is weak. Poetry could be devoted, very cleanly, to its own page.

To suggest that magazines buy poetry as filler is condescending and insulting. This magazine's prior policy of paying \$____ a line for poetry makes for awful-ly expensive filler. _____ pays only \$____ per poem. Most publications pay in copies only for poetry. I made \$____ from three poems I sold to this magazine a few years back.

(Editor's note: Dollar amounts and the name of another magazine were deleted from the preceding paragraph, for reasons that should be obvious.)

You say you have respect for poets. So much so that you "resist the idea of stuffing their work into any available nook or cranny." This doesn't work. It's like saying, "All the nice girls are married, so I'll stay single."

And to admonish that your policy is "not to publish poetry *at this time*" is one of those sickening pleasantries I often receive in rejection letters. "Sorry, your work isn't right for us . . . *at this time*." This phrase is hackneyed, and it is also otherwise known as the Great Stall—a pseudo-promise that does not carry the burden of a real promise.

I read a recent article about how much children love poetry. If teachers read poetry in class, then children grow up to love and read poetry on their own in higher grades and on into adulthood. To deny AMAZING® Stories readers of this opportunity to fall in love with science fiction poetry does a disservice to the respectable level that SF has recently achieved in literary, academic, and popular circles. This is not the only SF magazine perpetuating this ignorance.

Okay, I'll give you a *second* point for wanting to reserve a place on center stage for outstanding poetry. The sum total? You've presented only two viable points in your entire argument against the use of poetry. And I am still troubled. If readers are not clamoring for poetry, then why devote an entire page to explaining why you don't publish it? Rather than explanations, the editorial page could have been used for two or three poems.

*Jason J. Marchi
Guilford CT*

Jason is one of only two people who wrote in promptly with reactions to the editorial in the May issue (the other letter follows, and it's not really about poetry). In itself, that's a telling fact. When I open the door to criticism and complaints and only two people walk through it, there's no way I'm going to be persuaded that the majority of readers of this magazine want us to publish poetry. And that, regardless of any other desires or preferences, is the central point of this issue. If we had received anything remotely resembling a hue and cry in favor of poetry, we would have put verse into this magazine so fast it would make your stanzas shake.

"At this time," in this case, meant exactly what it said—and that was the entire purpose of the editorial: to help determine if what we're doing "at this time" was in line with what most of our readers wanted. (By the way, I've never used that phrase in a letter when I was turning down a manuscript submission.)

I think the price a magazine pays for filler material is unrelated to the question of whether that material is filler. Jason considers this magazine's previous payment rate for poetry to be generous—and it was, compared to some other rates I know of. But that doesn't change the fact of the way the poetry was used.

I devoted a page to the subject of poetry in order to give people who want verse in this magazine a chance and a reason

to express their thoughts. I guess I figured my motive was obvious, but maybe I was too subtle. I assumed that people who appreciate poetry are not the sort of people who need to be hit between the eyes with a two-by-four in order to get their attention. If I had used a two-by-four, would the results have been any different?

I, for one, would very much like to see poetry in your magazine. I would also like to see more humorous cartoons such as page 48 of your April 1992 issue.

One thing I strongly dislike is the theme of "alternate history," and while I realize you must try to please readers of every taste, I feel I'm receiving an overdose of these stories in your magazine. I didn't read more than two pages of "Against the Night" (May 1992) and will not bother to read the second installment at all. My favorite SF themes are travel to other planets and human/alien contact. I hope I'll see more of these themes in your magazine. All in all though, I think your magazine is better than others of the genre.

*Irma Laszlo
Parma OH*

Just a note to tell you how much I enjoyed the April issue, especially James Gardner's "The Young Person's Guide to the Organism." I have recommended it for a Nebula.

I have a couple of quibbles about the story: for one thing, I doubt that we'll be so extensively established in the solar system by A.D. 2038. And Gardner seems to gloss over the way interplanetary travel really works. But these are quibbles. He did a fine job, writing a "hard" science story with great style and a real feeling of awe.

*Ben Bova
Naples FL*

the
VORTEX

Phillip C. Jennings



• WALOFSKY '71

Illustration by Ron Walofsky

It was one of those days—bad joss from the moment she got out of bed. Andrea McFarlaine tore a nail hurrying into her Jag, ten minutes late for the interview that was likely to wipe out half the morning. And more than the morning, if it didn't turn out well. She stuck her *Moods of Space* tape into the player and chanted her mantra, but winding downhill traffic kept her off balance, and the whole nail would have to go—trimmed back to practically nothing.

Damn. Damn the whole rat race, and the rat pack that had her scent, as if she had no right to make a living. Andrea thought of those three books on her coffee table, heavy with anthropological data on the Shoshone Indians. She'd really meant to crack them last night, and spew out a load of scientific bafflegab if anyone tried to kick her in the credentials. Too late now. Too late to do anything but work her latest title into the interview as often as she could.

Laurel Canyon turned into Fairfax, west coast headquarters for CBS. All these studios, TV sitcoms blazoned on their marqueses. Talk shows too, and she was pretty enough. Five years ago, maybe, when New Age had been a livelier category. If she'd gotten into print six months earlier back then, she'd be *numero uno* now, and getting personal with Arsenio Hall.

Andrea patted for a cigarette and lit up. She tapped her carphone console. "Nicky? I'm on my way."

"Good. Don't worry. Positive energy all the way. Let your light shine."

"I tore a nail," she told him.

"Remember what I said last night," her agent went on, oblivious of this minor tragedy. "A bit of controversy isn't going to hurt. Ms. Greyhills can't get her thrills unless she builds you up. You're the center of her universe. It's all part of the excitement. Just don't call her a racist or a lesbian. Do it by innuendo or she'll get the audience sympathy."

"Me no fuck up. I've got my lines straight. But you said they won't ask about her."

"I said they promised to be nice. You know what media promises are worth," he answered. "If you're ready for the worst, you won't get mad."

"Aw, Nicky, I'm serene as all hell. See you at the Polo Club soon as it's over."

"Aren't you going to Nevada?" Nicky teased. "To meet your Spirit Mother?"

"Why did I ever stick her with the Shoshones?" Andrea complained. "I should have found some sexy tribe way in the boondocks. Guatemala, maybe. Jungles and strange drugs."

"But she's *not* Shoshone. In *Wings of the Vortex* you said she was the last of her pueblo. She just took refuge with them. Andrea, you've got this covered. They can't do like they did Carlos Castaneda."

"Wanna bet?" Andrea clicked off, swung into the KLCG lot and flashed the card they'd sent her to the attendant. She hurried up the steps and inside. Receptionist, green room, a few friendly remarks, another short walk, then the countdown. These last twenty seconds she took off her bracelets so they wouldn't clatter across three counties.

"My guest today is Andrea McFarlaine, author of *Seasons of the Dream*. Ms. McFarlaine attributes her spiritual guidance to an Indian woman she met on a road south of Elko, Nevada."

Andrea read a passage from her new book, discussed the need of 20th-century Americans to find themselves, and worked Socrates, Chief Joseph, Paramahansa Yogananda and Jesus Christ into the conversation. After the first commercial break, her interviewer quoted the Greyhills article attacking her books. "Their grandparents stole Native American lands and resources, and took our children to missionary schools to make them *civilized*. Now this latest generation of whites is appropriating what's left of our culture and hawking it for money—hawking a fraudulent image of our religion, mucked together with every kind of New Age enthusiasm. In the end we will be allowed nothing except our poverty."

After reading these charges the KLCG interviewer wanted to talk feminism and politics, one woman against another. Andrea shrugged. "I can't guess why the Spirit Mother chose to guide me. Was I lucky? Was it fate? I try to be receptive. Yes, I'm white, and the irony is I consider myself a feminist. The wisdom I write about is one that respects women."

After the next commercial the interviewer was kind enough to change the subject. "What now? Another book in the works?"

"I try to spend most of my time in the Other World I speak of, out in the high desert with my Spirit Mother. I need that balance. What she'll do with me—well, I've been promised a higher initiation. There's so much, secrets I can't talk about, as well as an open door and welcome to those who seek the Truth."

The interviewer bent into her mike. "Our first guest today was Andrea McFarlaine, author of a series of New Age books . . ."

So much for that. Andrea rushed to the green room and lit a cigarette. An overhead speaker zipped through a string of commercials. She reached to turn the volume down. Just then: "Stay tuned. After the news our next guest is Lois Greybills, noted Native American feminist. Ms. Greybills has asked for this chance to respond to Andrea McFarlaine's claims, and has the backing of the American Commission for Rational Thought, an organization that combats what they regard as superstition and bucksterism endemic in the New Age movement."

After the news? Ten minutes at most. Andrea broke for the green room door before her enemy could walk in on her. What a screw job! There ought to be a law. Trickery . . . false promises . . . she hurried out to her Jag, and only relaxed after she pulled into traffic. A few blocks later she tuned the radio, then reconsidered and clicked it off.

Aw, shit. Andrea turned it on again. She pulled into the next parking space and took out her nail file. It was too early for the Polo Club anyhow.

"I've asked to meet this Spirit Mother of hers," Greyhills claimed on the open air. "I've even left my number and address on her answering machine, but she's never re-

sponded. *I can say this much—we have no evidence she's left Beverly Hills for more than a weekend with her New York publisher these last three months.*"

"You've had people watching Andrea?" the interviewer asked.

Greyhills laughed. "We're an organization of two thousand members, and a couple are acquaintances of Ms. McFarlane. They take delicious pleasure in observing her peccadilloes, they're better than detectives, and they work for free. No, I won't say who they are, but doesn't it all hinge on that? Either there's a *Spirit Mother* who chose a Hollywood glitter-princess to give her secrets to, or she's just an incompetent popularizer of stuff she's regurgitated from the literature anyone finds in the 'woo-woo' bookstores."

To Andrea's mind, no real Indian should use words like "peccadillo" or "regurgitate." No real Indian should be articulate, passionately political, or backed by a coalition of her own making: lesbo-feminists and fuzzy-haired scientists. What about lawyers? Was it legal for Greyhills to call her a liar on the open air? A glitter-princess? *Incompetent?*

Andrea gunned into traffic toward her rendezvous with Nicky. At the club she tossed her keys to the valet and fumed inside. Her agent waved, his young trainee at his side. Andrea had nothing against Jews, but this new sidekick was so thoroughly Jewish; nose, beanie and whiny New York accent . . .

"Sit down. Mark and I were just discussing your trip to Indian country."

"What trip? I want a lawyer. We're going to sue Ms. Greyhills for everything she has," Andrea said.

"Three thousand books and an old yellow Volkswagen?" Nicky asked mischievously.

"You heard what she said on the radio this morning?" Andrea persisted. "My livelihood's at stake, and that pays for your lunches here. Let's not fuck around."

Mark jumped in. "That's why we think you should make the trip. Schmooze with some Zunis. Buy pottery. Pick up atmosphere, make friends and memorize some landscapes. If there is a trial, you'll want to make the right impression. You'll want to say, 'I was driving down Highway 61 just past that old memorial, when an eagle flew south off such-and-such mountain.' Stuff with data in it."

Nicky nodded. "I'll get you an itinerary and make the hotel reservations." Meaning Mark would do it, of course. Andrea looked at the kid. Mark couldn't help smirking back—his face was made that way. His older brother had put in two years with the Indian Health Service, and knew some sacred Hopi hotspots over in Arizona.

"I wish I could come with you," Mark nasalized. "I've always dreamed of getting an eyeload of the Grand Canyon, and Mesa Verde, and all that gosh-wow stuff. Those witch mountains, the northern Chuskas where my brother said even the Navajos don't go—if you make that your center you'll have the atmosphere and the obscurity, and you'll be within day-trips of lots of great scenes. We can rent you a houseboat on Lake Powell."

"Yeah, yeah," Andrea answered. "So who's a good

lawyer? Someone I can afford. You guys think I'm made of money."

They spent the rest of the lunch talking about Los Angeles's top guns; who was too old, too expensive, too self-aggrandizing. By the time Andrea got home, she was in no condition to write today's chapter on the *Anasazi Cosmos*.

It was a dumb cosmos anyhow, full of Edenic holes in the ground and successive worlds stacked on top of each other like the layers of a torte. Indian people were working on their fourth—or was it their ninth?—migration to the next world up. By contrast whites were a new breed, spawned from this world, with no past to speak of. The system compensated for white dominance by promising a better world for Indians who clung to the old ways. The fact that it did so made Andrea wonder if it was as ancient a religion as that. Maybe it had changed these last centuries. Too, it was future-oriented, which didn't seem very spiritual. It promised "pie in the sky." The commodity Andrea liked to dish out was big on personal dream-revelations and timelessness. She sighed heavily, lacking the energy to reconcile all these contradictions.

She paced the room, checking her dead husband's sculptures for dust. Her answering machine blinked *10 messages*. God, maybe Nicky was right. She needed to get away from all this harassment, from hate calls and fake sympathy. She punched button 3 and told Mark to hurry those reservations, and then she went upstairs to pack a couple bags.

The Jag wasn't a desert car; Andrea loaded into the Range Rover, figuring on an impromptu first night in Las Vegas. She launched into heavy afternoon traffic. It took three discouraging hours to get past San Bernardino. After sunset the world grew too dark to see much scenery, just a mantle of sensory deprivation and the lights of other cars.

So this was fun! A holiday trip of sorts. The fact that Andrea was going through so much effort brought the truth home: She might end up on the stand in a courtroom. An enemy lawyer might badger her with questions, trick questions with contradictory ramifications. They knew how to roast people in their own lies. Ms. Lois Greyhills might have planned all this, hoping to get sued. Greyhills had spies who knew Andrea, knew where and how she might be vulnerable.

Her cleaning lady? Her *previous* cleaning lady? No, people with brains. Nicky? Mark? —Oh, lordy. If Jew-boy Mark had set her up like a tethered goat, she'd use her dead husband's connections to see he never worked in Hollywood again!

Something about Mark made Andrea want to squash him. If he sensed that, he'd try to stay ahead of the game. He was responsible for her itinerary. He'd use that power to get at her and squash her first. This whole thing might be a setup.

Or she might be indulging in paranoia to jazz up a long dull drive. Andrea reached Las Vegas. She checked into her room, had a couple drinks, and called for a room-service massage. Next day after breakfast she did a little gambling. Around noon the front desk beeped

with an UPS packet for her—Mark had done his job. Nicky's sidekick had drawn precise red circles on USGS maps of Navajo country, and included reservations, timetables, and the names of good restaurants.

The red circles were hand-labeled, "Carter's Cave," for instance. Whatever that was. It lay in the heart of the northern Chuskas, those Navajo witch mountains. Andrea spread out the map on her hotel bed and used her fingers to estimate distance: Several miles from the nearest dotted-line road, miles of broken terrain and rattlesnakes. Jesus, she could die out there!

By implication an Indian Health Service doctor had made it to all these weird places, a weekend *here* and a weekend *there*. Maybe it wasn't all that hard. Maybe it would be interesting. She could get one hop closer today, to the Grand Canyon. She called to check out, and had a bellboy take her bags down to the Rover. One fat tip later she was on the road, her *Moods of Space* tape playing to precisely the landscape it was meant for.

Far ahead of her Andrea saw a yellow Volkswagen. She snorted. Ms. Greyhills? The bitch was Navajo, so it wasn't totally impossible. She tried to overtake the other car, but it vanished among the long rises and dips—No! There it was!

Allowing herself the briefest glimpse, Andrea zoomed by. The Volkswagen sat on the shoulder, the lid up on its little rear engine. The driver seemed to be working behind the passenger side. A mile went by before it occurred to Andrea that she could have stopped. She could have played Good Samaritan to her worst enemy! Wouldn't *that* have rankled Ms. Greyhills!

Maybe it was all this clean air and sunshine. Whatever the case, Andrea's brain worked slowly. She took an hour to hit on Mark's plot. He'd given Greyhills a copy of Andrea's itinerary so her pious enemy could videotape her doing something egregiously crass and non-spiritual at some Indian holy place. At least Greyhills could tape the absence of Spirit Mothers—Andrea coming and going without any encounters.

More paranoia. All this was ridiculous. The only thing that pointed to conspiracy was that dumb Volkswagen. Andrea reached the Grand Canyon and scanned the parking lots on her way to the main lodge. Volkswagens weren't common anymore. This wasn't the country for them. She looked again after an hour of canyon gawking, and gunned south for the only hotel Mark could book her into on short notice, on the outskirts of Flagstaff, still a long drive away.

The next day Andrea ate and shopped in Sedona, and signed her hardcovers in the New Age bookstores. She went back to her hotel, spent a second night, and drove north for Tuba City. The land grew stark and Marslike the moment she crossed into Navajo country. She could continue up to Lake Powell, or east into the Hopi mesas and beyond.

Business before houseboats. East it was. *Basha's* was the main supermarket in Tuba City, and a dirty yellow Volkswagen was parked among the pickups. Andrea went in to buy a carton of cigarettes, but if Greyhills was there, she was lost in the crowd of Navajo faces.

Andrea was practically a celebrity in Sedona, but she was unknown here, and left unrecognized. The Volkswagen was gone. She drove to Hopiland.

She spent that night yet further east in Canyon de Chelly, at a lodge whose restaurant Mark's brother seriously overrated; they must have lost their one good cook. Next morning she drove for the Chuskas by a route that was scenic at first, and then less so. Woodland dwindled to pinon brush and overgrazed desert as she angled north. Behind her the non-witch Chuskas were mantled with green. To her right the witch Chuskas were stark and buttelike and nasty.

Following Mark's map, she turned onto a rutted monster of a road, all rocks and potholes. Six miles and two hogans later it vanished entirely. Andrea saw nothing but distance between where she could park her car, and naked slopes baking under the noon sun. She shouldered a hiking pack in which her canteen and a couple packs of Virginia Slims rolled around loosely. Beer cans and broken glass were a testimony to the squalor of modern Indian life, or to the evil influences of Anglo culture—take your pick between these prejudices. Where the land started rising, Andrea saw signs of more ancient litter: pottery shards from God-knobs-when.

Someone had put a gate in front of a natural corral, rimmed on three sides. The gate was open now, horses abandoned in favor of trucks, and in the sandstone facade at the far end were dints carved to help any climbers. This had to be the route. Andrea scrambled up one level, and then to the next. Amazingly, a mountainside that had seemed featureless two miles back now boasted fissures, bends, overhangs and nooks.

There must be enough broken pottery here to fill a garbage truck, Andrea thought to herself. Very likely she was on a trail used by centuries of pueblo worshippers. At moments during her climb she looked west. Once she saw a plume of dust—another car bumping along the distant road.

A Volkswagen? Too far off to tell. The trail climbed. The Anasazi must have been half mountain goat. Andrea took a swig of water, and decided the next height was enough. She'd sit and chant, and open her soul to the influences . . . yes, she really would. When the whimsy struck her she enjoyed acting the role of Andrea McFarlane, religious disciple.

Not this time, though. There was a goddamn pond behind that upper ledge, a green, scummy crater in the rock with tadpoles swimming around like sperm. It was outlined by evaporation circles. Flies buzzed, and it stank quite unspiritually. An Anasazi water tank? Andrea sighed. Where now? She could break a leg on this mountain. Snakes might be near. They might be drawn by the water. Shit . . . and that black crack must be Carter's Cave. What a moment to think about snakes, when she'd have to poke inside local rattlesnake heaven!

Andrea scrambled closer. Evil breathed from the key-hole-shaped entrance, smelling of strange chemicals. The cold breeze blew out Andrea's first match when she tried to light a cigarette, her hands trembling from exercise.

She took a puff and waited for her heart to stop

pounding. God, she couldn't do it. She couldn't go in. A huge, black-beaked crow cawed at her and flew on. Andrea looked around. Aha! Western rational brains were good for something after all. The way the sun was angling, it would shine into the cave soon enough. All she had to do was wait.

Andrea drank more water and smoked, lining three lipstick-stained filters end to end on a shelf of rock. She weathered her panic, and time passed. The sun showed her what she could only have dreamed of seeing: a scene out of one of her own books, a flat floor two steps down, surrounded by a circle of painted pots. She muttered her mantra and slipped inside the cave.

The smell was weird, and she heard a sort of rustle, as if a hushed crowd were watching her. The pots were filled with sands, each a different color. Andrea made sure there was no crowd and no snakes, not in this chamber or what she could see of the next.

Then she smiled. Part of her mind stood outside herself, as always during moments of blessedness and healing. Vapors, fresh air, exercise . . . how extraordinary to feel this attuned, just at the moment of spiritual conjunction. Something switched inside her, and the paranoid Andrea, the evil Andrea, shrank into nothingness. What an opportunity! Images from her New Age library swam into mind. Sand paintings, of course—Navajo mandalas reminiscent of the Buddhists of Tibet. This flat stone floor was ideal for the purpose. There were big circles divided quadrilaterally along north-south-east-west axes, and she could see faint lines and shapes of color from the last time someone had done the ceremony in here.

In their pots the sands stood ready, almost shimmering with power. *Ab, yes, and who's to say my Spirit Mother isn't giving me a new test?* Andrea went outside into hot daylight, dizzy with visions of a whirling mandala-gate between the Anasazi worlds. What an idea for her next book—a sort of spiritual planet-hopping! As an afterthought she looked for Ms. Greyhills skulking around with cameras, but mostly she wanted to make sure the sun would give her enough time to create her masterpiece.

What the hell am I doing? Andrea swatted away this buzzing doubt, crushed her latest cigarette butt, and went back inside Carter's Cave. *Reality and dreams meet inside my soul*, she thought, attributing her light-headedness to the altitude. She heard what sounded like sleigh-bells, music from the next world up.

Up? Or down? If she did this wrong . . . but at this

hint of negative thought, the mandala in her mind grew teeth and a downward tongue like the Goddess Kali. Skulls and sword-blades—No! She closed her eyes and forced the image back into shape, and then reached into the first pot of sand.

Mark Birnbaum of the Nicholas Sharpe Literary Agency drove his rented Dodge as far as he dared, and hiked the last mile to the Greyhills hogan. Lois stood outside, handsome in her blue jeans and sunglasses, waiting for him. "Your car is going to block the water truck," she said.

"I'll go back and move it." Mark turned on weary legs.

"Tomorrow's good enough. It's always late." Lois paused and spoke again. "Andrea went by here."

"How long ago?"

"Long enough. She must have found the cave." Lois shivered in the hot wind. "If she has, she'll mess up. She hasn't a chance of painting the gate we use when we've had enough of your Anglo world."

Mark looked away. "I can't see her resisting the temptation to dabble, or any temptation at all. She likes the goodies of life. The cave would have taken my brother if you hadn't been with him, and Sam's as hardnosed as they come."

"The cave seduces most people," Lois agreed. "If they're not properly prepared."

"A trial would have torpedoed her reputation," Mark said after a pause. "She'd be blackballed in New York. This way the bosses will reprint her books a couple more times. My boss will get fifteen percent richer."

Lois looked grim. "A happy ending for everyone, then. Her too. She'll create her own microcosm, a place where she'll fit in perfectly, just like that Carter guy did. It'll express every aspect of her character. She'll be in solipsistic paradise."

"I love it when you talk dirty," Mark said. "Solipsistic?" "Because she'll be the only one there, except for the natively she invokes," Lois explained. "And because it's incomplete. We'll have to tuck her body deeper in the cave, next to Carter's and all the others who missed the target. Cold sleep. What do you think? In her fantasies she'll end up richer and even more famous, but at least you and I don't have to deal with her anymore. A happy ending for us, too."

Mark gave Ms. Greyhills a kiss. "What's this everyone tells me, about you being a lesbian?"

Lois laughed, and took him up to meet her sisters. ♦

Lennon Spex

Paul Di Filippo

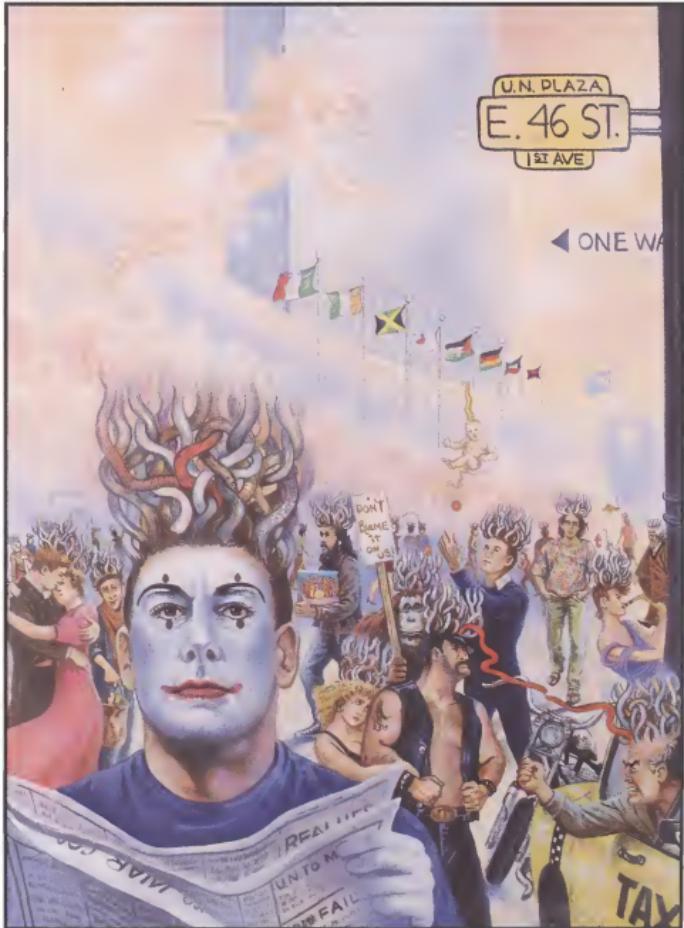


Illustration by Jaei

I am walking down lower Broadway, not far from Canal Jeans, when I see the weirdest peddler dude.

Now, when you consider that the wide sidewalk is jammed with enterprising urban riffraff—Africans with their carved monkeywood animals; Farrakhanized Black Muslims with their oils and incense; young white punks with their hand-screened semi-obscene T-shirts; sleazy old white guys with their weasel-skin Gucci bags and smeary Hermes scarves; Vietnamese with their earrings and pantyhose and pirated tapes—and when you also realize that I, Zildjian, am

totally inured to this spectacle through long habituation, then you realize that this guy must be incredibly weird.

Except he isn't. Weird, that is. Not bizarre. I guess it's more that he's incongruous, like.

He appears to be a Zen monk. Japanese or Chinese, Korean or Vietnamese, it's hard to figure. His head is shaved, he wears a golden robe and straw sandals, and he looks more serene than a Park Avenue matron after her first Valium of the day. His age could be anywhere from a year short of a legal drink to a year beyond early retirement.

The monk is apparently selling secondhand prescription eyeglasses. He has a TV tray with a meager selection neatly arrayed thereon. I see no handy-dandy lens-grinding equipment, so I assume there is no customizing. This gives new meaning to the term "cutrate ripoff."

I stop in front of the monk. He bows. I am forced to bow back. Uncomfortable, I fall to examining his stock.

Tucked away behind the assorted catseye, filigree, tortise-shell old lady spex lies one special pair of glasses, their stems neatly folded like ballerina legs, as incongruous among their companions as the monk among his.

I pick these glasses up and examine them.

They are a pair of simple gold wire-rims with transparent, perfectly circular lenses. The stems extend from the middle of the outer circumference on each lens; the bridge is higher, about two-thirds of the way up along the inside. The spectacles have no adornments.

Suddenly, I realize that these are what we would have called, more years ago than I care to ponder, "Lennon glasses." First popularized by Beatle John in the *Sgt. Pepper* album photos, later shown shattered on a posthumous jacket, they remain forever associated with his image, though he was to switch in later years to various aviator-style frames, undoubtedly seeking to harmonize his face with Yoko's in marital solidarity.

I do not suffer from near- nor farsightedness; I have no intention of buying the frames and replacing the lenses with polarized ones, since I believe in the utility of unmediated sunlight. Yet something compels me to ask if I can try them on.

"Can I, uh, try these on?" I ask the monk.

He smiles. (A smile from one of his disciples was how the Buddha knew his message was getting through.)

"You bet."

I unfold the stems. I notice a blot of what appears to be fresh blood on one stem. Maybe it's ketchup from some strolling patron's chili dog. Never squeamish, I lick my thumb and attempt to wipe it off. The blot temporarily disappears under my rubbing, then rematerializes.

The monk has noticed my actions. "Not to worry," he says. "Just a small stain from the shooting. Will most definitely not affect utility of the glasses. Please, try."

So I slip them on.

The rowboat is painted in psychedelic day-glo swirls of color; the wide rippled water which cradles it is purple. I am sitting on the middle bench, drifting downstream without oars.

On either shore, tangerine trees are interspersed with cellophane flowers of yellow and green that grow so in-

credibly high. The sky—you guessed it—is marmalade. With actual flecks of orange peel and English muffin clouds. A complete nutritious breakfast.

"Holy Salvador Dali," I whimper. I dip my hands into the purple water, stirring a scent of grape juice, and frantically try to divert the boat to shore.

"Zildjian," calls someone above me.

I answer quite slowly: "Yuh . . . yeah?"

"Stop paddling and look up."

The floating girl has kaleidoscope eyes and wears a lot of shiny gems, but not much else.

"You're being given a gift, Zildjian. There's no need to panic."

"Oh, man, I'm not sure—"

The boat is rocking. No, it's not. I'm sitting astride a centaur. Only instead of hooves, he's got bentwood rockers. He's propelling himself across a field, while eating a Scooter pie.

Lucy is beside me on another rocking-horse person. "Calm down, Zildjian. We don't invite many people here. You're the first in years and years. Trust me."

"What happened to the last guy who trusted you?"

Lucy pouts. "That was humanity's fault, not ours."

She opens the door of a taxi for me. It's made of old issues of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* with headlines about Vietnam. When I climb inside, my head goes through the newspaper roof and into the clouds. Lucy's too. As we cut through the moist vapor like wheeled giraffes, I find myself mesmerized by the sun reflected in Lucy's eyes.

She's leading me into the train station. "Just try them for a while. What have you got to lose? Here, see how good they look on you."

She summons over a porter made of modeling clay who resembles Gumbly. His tie is formed of mirror shards pressed into his chest. I study my reflection in the looking-glass tie. The glasses don't look half bad. . . .

The turnstile bumps my crotch and squeaks, "Sorry!"

"Have fun," says Lucy, and pushes me through.

I am clutching a streetlight on Broadway. I recognize it because it is the one that still bears a tattered remnant of a poster protesting the most recent war, on which someone has scrawled a particularly clever slogan: "Real eyes realize real lies."

Looking up, I anticipate the worst.

But no. The world—seen through what surely must be nonprescription lenses—is normal.

Except for the people.

Every last person is crowned, like Medusa, with a nest of tendrils.

From the skull of each person exit innumerable organic-looking extrusions which terminate about eighteen inches away from their heads. The tendrils are all colors, thicknesses and textures. Their ends are sheared off flat, and they do not droop. It is as if they enter another dimension a foot and a half away from the individual.

The people look rather like rainbow dandelions gone to seed.

A dog stops to pee on my pole. Its head too is studed with worms, but not as many as the humans'.

A nasty thought occurs to me. I release my grip on the pole and slowly raise my hands to my own head.

I too am wearing a snaky turban. I can feel the velvety/rubbery/slidy/scratchy hoses rooted to my cranium.

I rip off the Lennon glasses.

Everyone's head-snakes are gone. Mine too, I can tell by touch.

Trepidatiously, I put the glasses back on. The snakes come back.

I sense someone by my side. It's the peddler monk.

He alone of everyone in my sight has but one tendril coming from his head. It's golden like his robe and, emerging from the exact center of his crown, rises vertically up.

The monk smiles again and lifts one hand to his golden carousel-horse pole.

"Goes straight to Buddha," he says, and laughs. "Use glasses wisely. Goodbye."

He vanishes into the mass of pedestrians.

Still wearing the glasses, I wearily sit myself down on a stoop.

Man, how can all these people be oblivious of the spaghetti coming out of their heads? Why don't they feel its weight? Come to think of it, why don't I feel the weight of mine? I reach up and find the offending objects still tangible. How can something be perceptible to the touch yet weigh nothing? Or is that we're just used to the weight . . . ?

The mutt that nearly peed on my foot comes over to keep me company. I offer my hand and it starts to lick it. As it slobbers, I watch its doggy head in horror.

A new tendril is emerging from its skull! And it is questing like a cobra toward me!

Suddenly into my field of vision from above a matching tendril of my own pokes, heading toward the canine feeler!

I jerk my hand away. The dog snarls, and its tentative tendril changes color and texture, as does mine. But now they seem less eager to meet.

Nobody ever called me Carl Sagan. But I am a fairly quick study. And you would have to be as dumb as a Georgia senator not to figure out what is going on with these worms.

These tendrils coming out of everyone's head represent emotional attachments, bonds, links of feeling and karma. All the connections we pick up in life. Strings of love and hate, just like some bad pop song.

The dog has stopped snarling and is licking itself. As an experiment I extend my hand again. It sniffs tentatively, then gently strokes my fingers.

This time, I let our feelers connect and fuse.

I love this dog! Good dog! It's practically in my lap, giving my face a tongue-bath. It loves me too. Aw, poor street-critter. I'm really ashamed of what I'm going to do next.

I grab hold of the seamless cable connecting our heads and yank it out of the dog's skull. Better to experiment with his head than mine. There's a slight resistance, then the connection comes away with a subliminal *pop!*

The dog yelps, then apathetically climbs off me and goes to sleep.

The cable in my hand, now anchored only at my end, is squirming, trying to reattach itself to the dog. I don't let it, and within seconds it just sort of withers up and vanishes like a naked hard-on in a blizzard. I can feel a ghostly patch fading on my skull. The cable, I realize, wasn't that strong to begin with, pink and thin as a pencil, and didn't put up much of a fight to survive.

Armed with this new insight into the nature of the head-spaghetti, I watch the people around me more closely.

Everyone, I now notice, is continually extruding new feelers every few seconds. In fact, if I focus my vision through the Lennon glasses in some nameless way, I see close to people's scalps a haze of movement rather like the waving of polyps and corals in some undersea forest.

The vast majority of these embryonic attachments are transient, dying as fast as they are born. For instance:

A woman pauses before the window of a clothing store. She casts a line out like a fly fisherman toward an outfit on a mannequin. Passing right through the plate glass, it connects for a moment, and then she reels it back in and strides off.

Of course. You can have serious attachments to non-living things too.

And as if to repeat the lesson, a guy pulls his Jaguar up to a miraculously empty space, parks and gets out. The cable connecting him and the car is as thick as your wrist. But that doesn't stop him from flicking out a feeler toward a passing Mercedes. Your cheatin' heart . . . Or head, as the case may be.

A delivery guy sends out a probe aimed at a classy babe in furs, which, needless to say, is not reciprocated.

An old woman with a walker whips out a feeler toward a young doctor-type.

A girl whom I half know, an architecture student at NYU, shoots out an extension just like one of Spider-Man's webs to an elaborately carved cornice that catches her eye.

A dude and his babe stop at a corner, kiss and part. The connection between them is thick and strong. As they get further apart, beyond the combined three-foot extension of their bond, it hazes out at its midpoint, entering whatever extradimensional continuum allows individuals to remain connected to distant people and things.

I've seen enough.

It's time for me to go home and learn more.

Standing in front of my bathroom mirror, I begin to pull the cables out of my head, one at a time.

Out comes this gnarly grey vine. What resistance . . . Whoops, suddenly I don't feel anything for my folks! Mom, Dad, what are parents good for anyhow? It's spooky. There's just a big blank spot where there used to be filial fondness. I don't like this. Better plug this one back in . . .

What's this thin slick red-white-and-blue-striped one? Yank it. Patriotism? Who'da thought I had one of those? Wonder what it connects to on the other end? The White

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House? The Lincoln Memorial? Plymouth Rock? Different for everyone, maybe . . .

Here's a little slippery green eel of a thing. Tweak it out. Holy shit, that game-show hostess! I never even knew on a conscious level that I had the hots for her! Mega-gross. Man, I'm killing this one. I hold it to one side till it crumbles away. Can't be too careful about where you put your feelings.

Like a mad oldtime switchboard operator, I spend the next couple of hours pulling cables, memorizing which ones channel what feelings. (Once I yank too many simultaneously and get kind of spacey feeling, as if adrift in the cosmos, spinning aimlessly across the universe.) I soon learn how to tell the difference between one-way connections, such as those to inanimate objects or unresponsive fellow humans (Sherry Gottlieb, a high-school crush), and two-way ones, such as those to another person who feels for you too. There's a different kind of pulse in each; a unidirectional flow in the former, an alternating current in the latter.

Since I basically like myself as I am, I plug nearly all of my attachments back in, although I do eliminate the ones for Twinkies and cigarettes.

A sudden inspiration dawns on me like sunrise on Mercury. I could get rich from these glasses! All I have to do is open an aversion-therapy center. I'll practice some mumbo-jumbo, yank people's addictive connections—assuming, and I think it's a safe bet, that everyone's cables resemble mine—and presto, you're looking at the next pre-bankruptcy Donald Trump (only without the bad taste).

But then I remember the parting words of the monk who gave me the glasses: "Use them wisely." And how about that single connection he had? "Goes straight to Buddha" . . . ?

I take off the glasses and look at the ineradicable spot of blood on the frames. I think about John Lennon. What did he do with these glasses?

I imagine a little devil popping into being on my left shoulder. He's leaning on a pitchfork, wearing a derby and smoking a cigar. He blows smoke into my ear and says, "He got rich, you schmuck!"

An angel appears on my right shoulder. Wings emerging from his black leather jacket, he's holding an electric guitar in place of a harp. "But that's not all he did, Zildjian. He made a lot of people happy. He contributed to progress. He improved the culture."

"He laid a lot of dames," says the devil.

"Yes, but always sought to express a philosophy of life, to illuminate people."

"Nothing gets a babe illuminated hotter than a dose of philosophy."

The angel flies over my head and lands next to the devil. "You cynical philistine!"

"Hey, back off!" The devil brandishes his pitchfork, puffing on his cigar till the coal glows. The angel hefts his guitar like a club and takes a swipe at his opponent. They both tumble off my shoulder, locked in that eternal pro wrestling match of the spirit.

Their arguments have helped me make up my mind.

I will use the glasses to feather my personal nest a little. But I will also do something very good for humanity with them.

But while the personal options are quite clear to me, the larger ones persist in staying somewhat hazy.

I let them remain so. The first thing I want to do is head over to Cynthia's apartment.

Cynthia and I broke up for what we both correctly surmised was the last time just a week ago. The cause was my telling her that this hunky actor she admired reminded me of an ambulatory roast beef, and probably had as many brains. From the nature of this tiff, you can probably gather that our relationship was not all that deep.

But I am still attached to her. I know, because I found the tendril. But it turns out to be strictly a one-way hook-up, all the emotion flowing out of me and hitting a barrier on her end like a sperm hitting a diaphragm.

Now I am going to change that.

Cynthia is home. She is getting ready for her waitress job. I find her very attractive in the cowgirl boots and short skirt with tail feathers featured on the help at Drumsticks 'n' Hot Licks, the fried-chicken country-western club, and I tell her so.

"Yeah, great," Cynthia replies rather coldly. She keeps her back to me, adjusting her strawberry-blonde coiffure in the mirror. I am amazed that she can get her brush through all the karma-cords, which apparently offer no resistance.

Cynthia eyes me in the looking-glass, and I am briefly reminded of the plasticine porter's tie. It's hard to believe that she cannot see all my tendrils, including the one leading to her, but it is true. Then she notices my spectacles.

"Since when did you start wearing glasses?"

"Since I met a Buddhist street vendor who sent me on a trip to another dimension."

"Yeah, right. You'll never change, Zil. What do you want? I assume you didn't come over here just to compliment me. Come on, out with it. No mind games, either. And make it fast, 'cause I've got to get to work."

"Cynthia, we need to talk," I begin, laying down some sensitive-type patter just to distract her. She has turned away from the mirror and is bent forward, rummaging thorough her purse. Meanwhile, I am inching closer, within reach of her personal emotional attachments.

I zero in on one which is a livid purple and resembles in some strange indefinable way my own connection to the game-show hostess. I deftly grab it and unplug it from Cynthia's head.

She twitches and says, "Hey, what are you doing?"

"Just admiring the scent of your hair."

"Well, quit it. You're creeping me out."

I push the connection into my own head. Just as I thought! It goes straight to that hambone actor who was the cause of our breakup. I am suddenly overwhelmed with impure thoughts about his bod. Yuck! This is not for me. I pop the tendril out and jack it into Cynthia again.

Then I do something I haven't attempted before.

I pull on the cable in the other direction, trying to yank it out of the actor, where I doubt it's heavily anchored. My physical effort is apparently transmitted successfully along the cable through the extraspatial dimension it traverses, for it suddenly comes loose.

I swiftly fuse the end of Cynthia's one-way cable for the actor with my one-way cable for her, which I have just unplugged at her end.

She straightens up as if goosed by Godzilla and wheels around to face me.

"Zildjian, you're—you're different somehow. . . ."

Even knowing what's going on, I am overwhelmed by the synergy of the new connection, which is full and taut as a firehose under pressure. "Cynthia, I—you—"

"Oh, come play in my strawberry field!"

After that, it's our own private Beatlemania.

The next few days proceed swimmingly.

I get a new car and a line of credit without even putting on a necktie. It's only a small matter of establishing the proper connections. At the car dealer's up near the Plaza Hotel, I borrow the owner's hookup to his elderly grandmother.

"No money down, no payments till next year, and no finance charges? Why not? I'm sure you're good for it."

At the bank, I utilize the loan officer's feelings toward his mistress to secure a large sum of cash, a Gold Card and no-charge checking with fifty-thousand-dollar overdraft protection. The only complication is his hand on my knee.

I maintain both these links for a few days to insure that the dupes do not come to their senses and renege on the deals before they are solid. (I am a little troubled about the cold shoulders which are no doubt being received by Granny and Lolita, but reassure myself that things will soon be back to normal for them.) Finally, I gratefully sever the adopted links, watching them retract through their transdimensional wormholes. Hopefully, they will reestablish themselves with their natural objects.

What a relief, I can tell you. It has always been my philosophy that you've gotta go through this world as free as you can, and these extra bonds drag me down.

I think from time to time of the monk, and his single golden cord. . . .

Cynthia and I spend the next couple of weeks having some major fun, she having turned in her tail feathers. We eat at the best tables in the best restaurants, gain immediate entrance into the smartest clubs, receive front-row concert tickets for the hottest acts gratis, and in general carve a path through the city like Henry Moore through a block of granite.

One day Cynthia asks me to accompany her to the hospital, where her sister has just had a baby.

At the maternity-ward window, I stare in disbelief at all the squalling or sleeping infants.

Each one has a single golden cord, just like the monk's. A few of the older ones have tentative parental connections, but basically it's just that one heavenly stalk going straight up to who-knows-where.

After that, I start examining kids everywhere more intently.

Most of them seem to maintain their heavenly birth-right pretty much intact up till about age three. After that, it starts to dwindle and dim, getting thinner and paler until it finally vanishes around age ten, tops.

In all of New York, I fail to find an adult other than the missing monk who still has what he or she was born with. And that includes, natch, me.

Of course, I am not exactly hanging in the places where such a person might necessarily be found.

And although several times I almost take the opportunity to unplug a kid's golden cord and sample the current flowing down it, I never quite dare.

I realize I'm afraid it might reveal how shallow what I'm doing is. . . .

One day about a month after getting the Lennon spectacles, just when I am starting to get bored with how easy life is, I am driving alone down First Avenue when I encounter an enormous flock of cars being herded by a squad of sheepdog cops. Poking my head out the window, I politely inquire of a policeman as to what's going on.

"It's the President," replies the cop. "He's speaking to the U.N. before the war starts."

"The war? I thought the war was over. . . ."

"That was the last one. This is a new one."

"Well, who are we against this time?"

"What's amatta, doncha watch TV? The enemy is South Arabiraniopistan. Their leader's here too. He'll be lucky if he don't get lynched."

I am not sure I have gotten the name of the country right; I never was one for following politics much. But this war-thing is definitely bad news of at least the magnitude of the incarceration of James Brown.

Suddenly I recall my vow to do something good for all humanity.

I get out of the car and hand my keys to the cop.

"Here, park this, willya?"

He starts to open his mouth to utter some typical cop thing, but I deftly make use of his obedience cable to his superiors (a slimy thing I always hate to touch), and secure his complete cooperation.

The U.N. is crawling with security. I watch for a few minutes until I ascertain who the head honcho is. Then I approach him.

This is not a time to cut corners, so I indulge in a little overkill. Not only do I quickly yank and plug into my skull his obedience connection to his distant boss, but I also take over his links with his wife, dog, son and what appears to be his riding lawnmower. (I always said these G-men were sickos.)

"Would you mind escorting me in?" I ask sweetly.

"Of course, sir. Right this way."

Issuing orders over his walkie-talkie, the Secret Service agent soon conducts me backstage in the Assembly chamber.

I now face a minor problem: how to get close enough to the President for what I need to do. My outfit is certainly not going to help, as I am wearing a Hawaiian shirt, green scrub pants a friend stole from Bellevue, and huaraches.

Improvise, improvise. "Loan me your suit coat."

"Certainly."

Thus somewhat more suitably accoutered, clutching a shopping list from my pocket as if it were a classified memo I must deliver, I step out onto the dias, my captive agent dutifully running interference for me.

The platform is full of seated dignitaries. The Secretary General is speaking at a podium. Television cameras are focused on us. I have always wanted to appear on television, but not in this fashion. . . .

Using the narrow space behind the rank of chairs, I sidle up inch by inch to where the President and his counterpart are seated. The Prez's prep-school Puritan face is puckered into a mask of righteous indignation. The leader of our enemy wears a smug duplicitous puss like what you might see on a drug dealer who just successfully tossed his stash out the car window and down a sewer before the narcs closed in.

No one is paying any attention to me.

Yet.

A thick orange scaly hawser of hate runs between the two leaders. I've never seen anything so malignant-looking. I truly believe for the first time in the reality of war.

I am now within reach of the emotional linkages of these geopolitical megalomaniacs. Unfortunately, people are starting to take notice of me, and not in a kindly way.

Before they decide to do something, I act.

Gripping the hate-cord with both hands, I attempt to yank its ends out of the leaders' heads. The resistance is immense. I strain—to the audience, both at home and in the Assembly, it must look, I am sure, as if I am gripping an imaginary barbell with the leaders' heads as weights and trying to press it for an Olympic record.

Finally, the hate-cord pops out. Both leaders jerk like gaffed barracudas.

I can't resist leaning forward and whispering in their ears.

"Imagine there's no countries, boys, it's easy if you try. And war is over, if you want it. . . ."

In the next instant, I pop the Prez's patriotism link and plug it into the head of the South Arabiraniopistan guy. Then I swiftly jack the other guy's loyalty into the Prez.

All the hoodoo movements this involves over the heads of the two leaders is apparently too much for the unseduced security people, who now pile on me as if I were the football in a Super Bowl game.

My Lennon glasses shoot off my face and fly through the air. I think I hear them crack. But I could be wrong. Sounds are rather muffled through a layer of human flesh atop me.

I black out.

During this more than usually unconscious state, Lucy appears to me, naked and resplendently begemmmed.

"A fine job, Zildjian. You are welcome to visit us any time." She starts to fade.

"Wait, hold on, how do I get back to where I once belonged . . . ?"

But there is no answer.

I am in prison for only six months. The pants from Bellevue helped my insanity defense. I don't mind. Even if no one else realizes what I've done, I can relish being a working-class hero. Much to my amazement, Cynthia visits me three times a week. I had somehow thought that all the relationships I had rigged would vanish with the glasses.

During my imprisonment, I am proud to report, our President and the leader of South Arab-etc., after their stunning reconciliation in front of the entire world, are photographed playing miniature golf together at Disney World, and America agrees to purchase its new ally's entire output of camel-dung fertilizer, or some such similar commodity.

One day thereafter, I am walking down Broadway when I see the weirdest peddler dude.

I cautiously approach the monk. He smiles broadly and points to the top of my head.

"Nice looking lotus blossom you got there."

I don't let on that I am pleased. "Hunh. Whatcha got for sale today?"

The monk holds up a pair of clunky black retro plastic frames. They look vaguely familiar. . . .

"The name 'Peggy Sue' mean anything to you?" ♦

In and Out With Me

John Morressy

Dressed as brokers, I^{1,4} left the building together, took an express roller downtown, entered the Wall Street Bankomplex, and separated. After enough twists and turns to confuse an Apache tracker, I¹ boarded the 10:48 hydrofoil to Staten Island and flew from there to Maryland. I⁴ caught a copter to Long Island and chartered a small private 'foil from Freeport. Meanwhile, I² had headed crosstown by a devious route, taken a shuttle to Newark, and then a commuter flight to Delaware.

I³ spent the morning at the office. About 12:45, I³ walked the few blocks to Harry's, had a leisurely lunch, and went to the apartment to await messages. As soon as I³ learned that I^{1,2,4} had arrived, I³ left, disguised to rendezvous with the roller that was waiting for me³ uptown.

All of this dodging and backtracking seemed like excess caution, but it's what Senator Buckstone wanted, and the Lucky Clover Detective Agency does its best to satisfy the client. Buckstone had said to be discreet and cautious. He backed up his words with payment in advance. Discreet and cautious it was.

The driver of the roller was



Illustration by Pat Morrissey

not chatty. Once I³ identified my³self, he kept his eyes on the road and his mouth shut. I³ wasn't sure whether he had spotted me³ as a clone, or was just unsociable. The roller was a luxury model, with plenty of room to stretch out. I³ caught up on my³ sleep. In this business, that's one of the first things you learn.

The senator's secretary met me each time, and showed me to my room. All four rooms were at the south end of the house, farthest from the road. I³ arrived at 6:50 in the evening. Buckstone was not expected until late that night, and none of the staff or servants was talking about anything, not even the weather. Discreet and cautious were the style here, too.

The Senator had an excellent bar. I^{1,2} went for the sour mash and I³ took three fingers of single malt. I⁴ seldom touch anything harder than mineral water, but I⁴ treated my⁴self to a glass of the Gallo '41, an elegant Riesling I⁴ hadn't seen more than twice in my⁴ life. It was even better than its reputation.

Dinner was simple and superb. Buckstone's kitchen was as good as his cellar. It was common knowledge that he fancied himself a gourmet and something of an expert in the rare California vintages, and this evening showed that his opinion of himself was well founded.

Buckstone had a lot more going for him than a good kitchen staff and a refined palate. He was the wealthiest man in the Senate, handsome as a holler star and healthier than most men half his age. At college, he had been quarterback of a team that went undefeated for three years, and a good enough actor to play the lead role in *Macbeth* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Nearly twenty years later—and not an ounce heavier—he looked as though he could still bring home the trophies and get the curtain calls. He was Phi Beta Kappa, with a law degree, a Master's in economics, and a Ph.D. in international studies. Buckstone had drafted the treaty that resolved the Antarctica crisis of '37 and drawn up the Pan-Africa Economic Plan of '41. He was a major player in the big political arena, no question about that, and he had the necessary drive and ambition to make it to the very top. People spoke of him as this century's Jefferson. The only question in my mind was what need a man like Buckstone had for Joe Kilborn and the Lucky Clover Detective Agency.

He didn't need my advice, my good will, or my protection, and I certainly couldn't teach him anything about politics. So why had he gone through all this cloak-and-dagger business to get all four of me here? I^{1,2} didn't ask questions about a client who paid a generous retainer in advance, and I³ kept my doubts to myself. But I⁴ wanted to know.

Buckstone arrived a few minutes after midnight, with no advance notice. His coming had the effect of a system-wide alert. Everyone in the house sprang into action, no one doing anything in particular but all of them looking very busy at it. An aide announced his entrance as reverently as if Buckstone were descending on the wings of angels instead of in a helicopter.

"What am I supposed to do?" I² asked.

"Stay here. The senator will see you when he's ready."

"What I meant is, should I kneel, or is a bow enough?"

The aide blinked. I³ gave me² a nudge in the ribs. My² idea of harmless joshing sometimes upsets people. That's one of the reasons my² nose has been rebuilt a few times. The aide was still groping for a response when Buckstone made his entrance, trailing a gaggle of staffers.

"Kilborn of the Lucky Clover Agency?" he said, giving me a quick once-over, left to right.

"That's right, Senator," I³ said, and I^{1,2,4} nodded.

"Leave us alone," he said, dismissing the staffers with a wave of his hand. When the door closed behind the last of his people, he said, "Any trouble getting here?"

I³ gave him a quick rundown of my travels. One by one, I assured him that my arrival had been unseen by anyone outside the household.

"Good. And you're prepared to stay for a few days?"

"That's what we agreed," I³ said.

"Are you prepared to make a longer commitment?"

"How much longer?" I³ asked. There was nothing pressing at the moment, but it's not good to be too easily available.

"I want your exclusive full-time services around the clock until eight weeks from next Tuesday."

"That's Election Day," I⁴ said. "Are you telling me—"

Buckstone held up a hand for silence and said, "I'm telling you nothing until I know whether you're on my team. I want your answer now."

"What's the arrangement?" I⁴ said.

"Your usual rate, plus a fifty-percent bonus. You'll earn it."

There was a minute of silence, while Buckstone waited, drumming his fingers on the desktop. "I'll stay," I³ said. I^{1,2,4} nodded in agreement.

Buckstone narrowed his eyes, sat back and said, "Then it's agreed. Three of you are now my personal bodyguards. You'll be at my side, highly visible, wherever I go for the next eight weeks. The fourth will remain here in reserve and act as liaison."

"You've got plenty of bodyguards already," I³ pointed out.

"I do. And when I'm running for President, I'll have more," Buckstone said. I⁴ had suspected something like this ever since his people had contacted the agency, but I^{1,2,3} was taken by surprise. Only I³ showed it. I^{1,2} tried never to reveal what was going on inside my^{1,2} head. Buckstone took a moment to bask in the sound of his own announcement, then went on. "But none of my other bodyguards are identical with one another. That's why I want you."

It struck me⁴ as revealing that Buckstone said "I want" and not, more accurately, "I need." But I⁴ didn't comment. At the time, it seemed no more than an interesting Freudian slip that showed a side of his character not usually on public display.

"I'm going to announce on Tuesday," he went on. "By the time I get the primary and the convention out of the way, I'll have only six weeks to campaign."

"You seem pretty sure you'll get the nomination," I³ said.

"It's an absolute certainty. Bet your shirts on it, and you can retire on Election Day plus one."

I^{3,4} seldom bet, but I^{1,2} made a mental note of that. "Thanks for the tip," I⁴ said. "But why do you want identical bodyguards?"

Buckstone smiled like a cat savoring an especially tasty canary. Then his expression turned to ice. He looked me in the eye one by one and said, "Everything I'm going to say now is in the strictest confidence. Is that understood?"

"If I didn't respect my clients' confidence, I wouldn't be in business, Senator," I⁴ said.

"And you won't be in business if a word of what I'm going to tell you ever gets out."

"If you don't trust me, don't hire me," I² said, and I^{1,3,4} started to rise.

Buckstone gestured for me to stay. He flashed a smile that would make roses bloom on top of Mount Everest. "I trust you, Kilborn. You'll understand why I'm being cautious when you hear my campaign strategy." I settled back in my chairs. He leaned forward and paused for a moment as if resolving his last-ditch doubts; then he said, "Ever since the reformers got their hands on campaigning, the race for the White House has been strictly a media event. The voters see images, not people. I think they have a right to see their candidates face-to-face. It occurred to me that the most innovative approach to campaigning for the Presidency in 2044 might be one of the oldest: a whistlestop tour of the country, shaking hands and kissing babies like an old time politician. Trouble is, there are too many hands to shake and babies to kiss."

"Not many whistlestops, either," I⁴ said.

"I've got a problem here," I¹ said. "What's a whistlestop?"

"It's an old political term," Buckstone said.

I⁴ helped him out. "In the old days, politicians used to campaign from the rear platforms of trains. They'd stop at every small station, places where the train ordinarily stopped only on a signal."

"Like a whistle?"

"No. The train blew its whistle to let people know it was stopping."

Buckstone had been silent long enough. He wasn't used to it. "There aren't any whistlestops left, but the interregional expressways connect all major population clusters. A motorcade across the continent will catch every voter's attention."

"Sure, but doing it in forty-two days will kill the candidate. If anyone tried it, he'd be a burnt-out wreck by Election Day. It's too much for one man," I² said.

Buckstone paused, gave another of those feline smiles, and went on. "But three men could manage it."

"I bet they could," I⁴ said.

"Oh, they definitely could. It's been worked out, right down to the last detail." A bit more smiling, then Buckstone said, "You know, you gave me the idea, in a way."

"Me?" I^{1,3} said, surprised.

"You. It would be so easy for a clone."

"Nothing's easy for a clone, Senator," I¹ said.

"Things will improve, Kilborn. That's on my agenda. I wouldn't be surprised if in another twenty or thirty years, when we've overcome the prejudices of ignorant people, we see a lot of clones in political life. It makes good sense."

"We might run for Congress," I⁴ pointed out, "but only a natural born citizen can become President. That bit about 'natural born' has caused some problems for clones."

Buckstone did a take. "I meant local office."

It was really something to look forward to. Clones could stop being entertainers and private investigators, and become small-time politicians. "That's an interesting sociological observation, but we're talking about the 2044 elections, aren't we?" I⁴ asked.

"We are. And they're going to be the most exciting elections of this century. I'm going to have a motorcade campaign and visit all the states, and shake hands and kiss babies and give a dozen speeches a day and hold daily press conferences."

"It's going to be a tough drive to Hawaii," I² said.

Buckstone gave me² a dirty look and corrected himself. "All the contiguous states. I'll do it with the help of my two identical doubles."

"There's no such thing as identical doubles among solos," I² said.

"With the help of the best plastic surgeons, there is. You'll be able to see for yourselves before long." He smiled again, as if he expected applause.

"That's a little tricky, isn't it, Senator?" I⁴ asked.

His smile vanished. "It's absolutely legal, Kilborn."

"I'm not talking ethics, I'm talking politics. If you're caught using doubles, it will be all over the media. Your opponents will jump on it. They'll claim you're deceiving the voters. You'll be finished."

"You're not the first one to think of that, Kilborn. Take a look at these," Buckstone said, pressing a switch on his desk. A section of the wall glided up to reveal a screen, and the lights dimmed. "This is how I'll be traveling."

Views of six huge interregional roadrollers flashed over the screen. They were starred and striped in red, white, and blue, and very impressive. They were the biggest I'd ever seen: four of them were the size of a one-family house, the other two about half again as large, with blackout glass everywhere but the windshields. These machines could cruise the interregional network at well over two hundred and fifty kph, and do it in comfort. And God help anything that got in their way.

"The candidate's caravan," Buckstone said. "Four of them will serve as my mobile campaign headquarters, where I'll hold briefings and press conferences twice each day. There'll be free access for all. Lots of mixing, plenty of interaction, everything very friendly and open. The two biggest ones will be the candidate's private quarters, closed to all outsiders. People will see me and my bodyguard go in and come out, but they won't know what goes on inside. Except for what I choose to leak, of course. It will work, Kilborn. Believe me."

"If you say so. What's my part in this?"

"You're a clone. You're worked with clones and handled clone-related cases. You've got the eye to spot the

kind of problems that might arise, and deal with them before they mushroom."

"You seem to have solved all the problems already."

"I want insurance. I'll be all over the place, working a twenty-three-hour day. I'll run my opponent ragged, and when I get to the White House I'll be ready to hit the ground running, and give this country the government it needs. I don't want distractions along the way."

Buckstone had certainly found a solution to the problem that had plagued Presidential hopefuls ever since the reforms that followed the Long Campaign of 2017–2020. That was when the President, the Vice President, and half the Congress, as well as twenty-two governors, had been at it nonstop from the week after inauguration. Four years of campaigning, while federal and state government went on hold and local government did as it pleased, were too much for the electorate.

The reformers had pushed through some tough legislation. All campaigning for the Presidency was restricted to the eight-week period before Election Day. Candidates couldn't play coy. They had one day in which to declare or hold their peace for four more years. One week after declaration came the national primary, and a week after that, the party conventions. Only then could campaigning begin: six weeks of it, and not a minute more.

The reforms went through unopposed. No one dared support the old system after the abuses of 2017–2020, and the recalls and impeachments of 2021. It was tough on candidates, but the thinking at the time was, "You want it, you work for it," and no one complained.

What the voters eventually complained about was never seeing a candidate in the flesh. There were no more state-by-state primaries, no more grass-roots rallies, no more local visits to the party faithful. Time pressure forced candidates to use television, hollies, and the press to reach the maximum audience. Personal appearances before crowds of less than a carefully screened fifty thousand contributors became a thing of the past. They simply weren't cost-effective. Buckstone's idea of an old-fashioned tour was a good one, but a physical impossibility in six weeks unless a candidate could campaign without stopping. Clones can do it, but solos have never managed to. Now Buckstone had figured out a perfectly legal way.

"One of you will work with me, and one with each of my doubles. You'll stick with your assigned man for the entire campaign. One will stay here on the compound and act as liaison and a reserve in case of sickness or accident," he said.

"Any preferences?" I³ asked.

"Work that out among yourselves. Marty Koll, my chief campaign manager, will meet you in the morning to give you the details." He checked his watch, rose, and said, "I've got a meeting. Welcome aboard."

Next morning at 10:15 I met with Marty Koll. He was a young man with more anxieties than he really needed. Skinny as an eel, he nevertheless perspired like a 300-pounder climbing a steep mountain under a hot sun. He talked fast and kept no notes, but he remembered every

word that was said at our three-hour meeting, during which he emptied six pots of tea.

We agreed to keep things simple. I¹ took the real Buckstone for my¹ assignment, and was advised that "the real Buckstone" was a phrase never to be spoken again. I² got Buckstone B, and I³ took Buckstone C. We didn't get to meet them, which was something of a surprise, but this was Buckstone's show, and I let him and his staff run it their way.

Each double was doggedly referred to as "the candidate." The question of real names never arose. As far as I and the rest of the world were concerned, their real name, and identity, was Buckstone.

It struck me⁴ as odd—maybe "eccentric" would be a better term—that all three Buckstones were never seen together by anyone, not even their bodyguards or staffers. True, we'd soon be spending every minute of every day in each other's presence, but a meeting of all concerned parties seemed to be the logical start of this operation. When I⁴ asked, Koll said that the senator had decided there was no need for such meetings.

Buckstone was the client, and he knew what he wanted. I⁴ didn't press the point. Nevertheless, I⁴ thought it odd. I told myself that it made sense from a security standpoint.

Koll and I⁴ worked out routines. Minute-by-minute contact and coordination were essential. We needed a secure computer link, and an unbreakable code for all communications. I⁴ took on those responsibilities, and stayed at the compound to monitor operations.

Everything was in place and everyone drilled by the following Tuesday, when Buckstone announced. He sailed through the national primary with 68.704 percent of the vote. That was more than enough to lock up the nomination and make the national convention into a coronation.

Buckstone's choice for Vice President was Luisa Carillo Flores, a killer debater with an incredible memory for figures. She had gotten most of the primary votes that didn't go to Buckstone, and their positions were close enough on the important issues to make them a compatible team. She was a little more liberal on domestic matters and a little more conservative on foreign policy, but they worked out their differences in a very cordial three-minute meeting and she accepted the Vice Presidential slot. She was warned that it was going to be a strenuous campaign all the way, but no one ever told her about the doubles strategy.

The day after the convention Buckstone and Carillo Flores appeared together in Los Angeles, all smiles and sportsmanship. Then they were off, and so was I^{1,2,3}.

The doubles were perfect, but only I⁴ could fully appreciate the polish of their performance. I^{1,2,3} and Buckstone A, B, and C were strictly isolated from the outside world in the security of our roadroller. When Buckstone A was accepting roses from Miss Something-or-other, shaking hands with a mayor, or backslapping the Grand Marshal, with me¹ at his side, Buckstones B and C and I^{2,3} were out of sight, either recovering from the last dynamic performance or getting ready for the next one.

Back at the Buckstone compound, I⁴ saw it all. I⁴ spent every day and most of every night shuttling between the hollies, the TV, and the printers, making sure everything was in synch, and when things quieted down—as they sometimes did for as much as fifteen minutes at a stretch—I⁴ ran Buckstones A, B, and C side by side, checking and comparing. There was never a slip. Those doubles were as good as clones.

I⁴ watched the campaign every day, day after day, for eighteen hours or more at a stretch. Buckstone's pace was exhausting his staff, but it was killing his opponents. It wasn't doing much for his Veep, either. She was one tough lady, but that was her problem. She was *only* one tough lady, and by the fourth week of campaigning, she had to take a break or risk a collapse in public. The media, who had been referring to Buckstone and his Veep as "The Indestructibles," promptly dropped Carillo Flores and started calling Buckstone "The Stone Candidate." He acknowledged his new nickname by stepping up his activities.

By this time, his opponents were stumbling through the campaign like zombies. They couldn't keep up the pace. Rankin and Delafield were both bright, and experienced at tough politicking, but four weeks of running against Buckstone was the physical equivalent of forty years at hard labor. Rankin looked like a man trying to decide between a stroke and a nervous breakdown, and Delafield like someone who had already decided, and was just looking for the right spot to fall down.

Fatigue began to take the toll Buckstone had counted on. The opposition contradicted their own statements, flubbed names, and garbled statistics even when they were reading from notes. Delafield turned up for a press conference in the wrong studio. Rankin showed up for a full-hour interview so exhausted that he sounded like a drunk. The public laughed, and Buckstone's people played up every fumble. "If they can't run a campaign, can they run the country?" was all over the place in those last weeks. And Buckstone never let up.

I⁴ watched Buckstone A, B, and C work like parts of a beautifully engineered machine, never a slip, no seams showing, absolutely identical down to the clearing of the throat at certain words, the tilt of the head before answering a question on foreign affairs, the gestures, the unblinking glare when certain words were mentioned. It was perfect. And it bothered me⁴. By the end of the fifth week of the campaign, it bothered me⁴ a lot.

I⁴ spent a good part of every day working closely with Molly O'Gara, an angelically pretty statistician who had been with Buckstone for six years and believed that he could do everything but raise the dead. I⁴ had looked forward to a pleasant working relationship that might, with any luck, blossom into something closer, but Molly made it clear right from the start that she'd as soon work with a trained rat as with me⁴. Nothing personal about it; just deep-seated loathing.

It's not uncommon. Most of us have learned to live with it. Back in the early days, when cloning was completely unregulated, a lot of people disliked us. Some

still do. For the browless, clones were something new to add to their list of racial and national hates. The intellectuals were not much better than the rednecks. "Tampering with nature" and "purloined identities" are among their gentler criticisms. Things have gotten better, but even now, when the government exercises rigid control and no more than a few hundred clones are created each year, there are too many soloos who look on us as tenth-class citizens.

I⁴ couldn't tell whether Molly disliked all clones on principle, or just me⁴ as an individual. I^{1,2} sometimes got touchy about negative reactions, but I^{3,4} generally didn't let those things bother me^{3,4}. Some soloos just can't deal with us. I^{3,4}'m willing to let it be their problem.

Ordinarily, I⁴ prefer clones to soloos when it comes to companionship. There's less ice to break. But there aren't many clones around, and some who are won't admit it. They'd rather pass for soloos. It makes life easier.

Molly was a great-looking woman, and smart, and I⁴ worked closely with her every day for as much as eighteen hours at a stretch, and the chill in her attitude was getting to me⁴. I⁴ tried being witty, and it did me⁴ no good. So I⁴ was charming for a time. Still nothing. I⁴ went on to try hurt silence, then suavity, then boyishness, and finally her reserve broke down. One day, at the end of the fifth week of the campaign, when we were alone and the machines were quiet for a few minutes, she mentioned a book she had read a few weeks back, when we still had spare time. As it happened, I⁴ had read it, too. We talked about the book for a few minutes, and then there was a profound silence.

Then she asked me⁴ what it was really like to be a clone. As soon as she had spoken, she turned bright red and tried to apologize. I⁴ gave her my⁴ most reassuring smile and took her hand. She didn't pull away for several seconds. I⁴ had made a breakthrough.

"No need to apologize, Molly. I'm happy to tell you," I⁴ said.

"You are, really? I've never . . . I mean, I've wondered ever since we started . . . You see, I never met . . . You're the first clone I've ever known."

"Do you have brothers or sisters?"

"One of each."

"Well, that's what it's like. Clones are like siblings, only more so."

"Like twins?"

"I've never known any twins, but I think I'm a lot like what people insist on calling identical twins. Only closer."

"Are you completely identical?"

"We start out identical, but differences develop along the way. Any given set of clones probably look exactly alike to soloos, but if you look closely you see the signs of normal wear and tear, and they're never the same on any two people, clones, or soloos, or twins, or whatever." I⁴ was thinking of the caps on my³ front teeth and the scar where my¹ gall bladder had been removed. My² rebuilt nose didn't show, but there were the scars in my² chest and shoulder where a disgruntled client had caught me² with a burst from a needle. I² was accident prone.

Molly looked to be satisfied with the explanation. "Does

each of you always know what the others are thinking?" she asked.

I⁴ hesitated, then decided not to tell her that a clone doesn't think in terms of self and others. It's too hard to explain some things to a solo. "I'm always on the same wavelength, but there's no mind-reading or telepathy. I'm just very sympathetic."

She thought about that for a time. "Suppose you had been separated all your lives, and never told. Would you know you were a clone?"

It was my⁴ turn to think. My⁴ first thought was that solos wonder about the damnedest things. After a time, I⁴ said, "I think I would. I'd feel that something was missing, if you know what I mean."

Her green eyes lit up. "I do! Once, when my brother—"

She was drowned out by a frantic simultaneous outburst from four of the printers. Seconds later, all the screens and hollies went on. When the machines were finally quiet, a couple of hours later, Molly and I⁴ each had work to do elsewhere and no time for talk. The personal life was put far to one side.

Before she left, she said, "Thanks for being so open with me, Joe. I hope I wasn't rude to ask."

"Not a bit. I'll tell you anything you'd like to know."

"And I'm sorry if I was distant, or seemed hostile."

"Don't give it a thought, Molly."

Next day we didn't even have time to nod to each other, but the day after that, in the early afternoon, things suddenly were quiet. Molly came to my⁴ desk with two cups of coffee and sat down.

"I think I understand about clones now, Joe. I never did before, but now I think I really do," she said.

"What is it you understand?"

"That you're individuals. You're really just like everyone else."

She didn't understand at all. Statistics, yes. Clones, no. But she looked so pleased with her new understanding that I⁴ didn't have the heart to correct her.

"I was never able to grasp how you could always be around people who look exactly like you, and not feel confused. I think I'd always be asking myself which me is the real one," she said.

"Frankly, the question never comes up. And if it did, I'd probably all say 'I am.'"

She thought about that. "Yes, I understand that now. It was Senator Buckstone and his doubles that got me confused. But it was different for him, I guess."

"How?"

"He knew the others were doubles. I could never have told them apart, even when they were standing right next to each other, but he knew."

This was a surprising announcement from someone who was not in Buckstone's inner-inner circle, and I⁴ followed it up. "Did you have a chance to see all three of them together?"

"Only once. They look as much alike as you do, Joe, but of course they've had help from cosmetic surgery."

I⁴ knew that. Nature doesn't produce identical solos, though it sometimes comes close enough to fool other solos. "How long did it take them to get the voices right?"

"The voices were very close right from the start. And they picked up the mannerisms with hardly any practice."

"They must have had pretty good coaching."

"Oh, yes, the very best. I never met the coaches, but the senator said that they were the absolute best in their field. He couldn't mention their names, of course."

"He couldn't let anyone meet them, either, I bet," I⁴ said.

"No. It was all done in absolute secrecy."

Everything in the communication center started clattering, flashing, blinking, and ringing all at once, and we ran to our posts. But I⁴ had learned enough. I⁴ was still bothered, and now I⁴ knew why.

That night I⁴ went carefully through Buckstone's library. The staff all had free access to it in our off hours. I⁴ wasn't looking for a book. I⁴ wanted something else, and I⁴ found it. Retroprogramming a 2044 computer for a 1980 game took a while, but I⁴ managed. Then I⁴ settled down to a long session of "Upward Mobility." It was the game that had made Buckstone's father his first million. I⁴ played all night. It was, as the instruction manual promised, an educational experience.

The next day I⁴ took time off to search out everything available on Garth Buckstone, the senator's father. The official biography was short, simple, and inspiring: boy genius, creator of some of the great computer games of the golden age, millionaire at thirteen, billionaire at sixteen, international financial power at twenty; tragically dead in a car crash at twenty-eight, leaving the eleventh largest personal fortune in the world to his infant son. All that was as familiar as the names of the weekdays. I⁴ wanted the real story, and I⁴ was fortunate to be in the only place in the world where it could still be found. It took some searching, but that's my⁴ business.

Two days later I⁴ had it all. What I⁴ still couldn't figure out was why Buckstone had hired the Lucky Clover Detective Agency. Was it his idea of the ultimate test? Was it sheer hubris? Or was he hoping to be caught?

I⁴ couldn't decide, but I⁴'d know soon. This was the last week of the campaign, and Buckstone would be returning to the compound for a final assessment. He and his doubles were to arrive the next night, Sunday. Election Day was Tuesday. There was plenty of time.

"I can give you three minutes, Kilborn. Not a second more," Buckstone said as I⁴ closed the study door behind me.

"How about three minutes from each of you? That'll give me nine."

"I didn't hire you for comedy. Come to the point."

"Certainly." I⁴ leaned on the desk, and in my⁴ most casual manner said, "How long do you think you can hide the fact that you and your doubles are clones?"

Buckstone was not easy to rattle. He looked at me⁴ without speaking, then he laughed softly and gestured for me⁴ to take a seat facing him across a broad no-man's-land of desk. After a long silence, he said, "How did you come up with that idea, Kilborn? Do you think all people who resemble each other are clones?"

"I got the idea from playing your father's first game."

"I didn't think anyone in my organization had time to play games. Rankin and Delafield put you up to this, didn't they? Their little weasel of a campaign manager would try anything," Buckstone said. He still looked unruffled.

"Nobody's put me up to anything. So far, nobody knows but me." I⁴ raised a hand in a cautionary gesture. "As long as I stay healthy, no one else has to know."

"That sounds like something a blackmailer might say."

I⁴ shrugged. "You can't blackmail an innocent man."

"What are you after, Kilborn? What the hell is this all about?"

"I have a sensitive ego, Buckstone. You played me for a patsy, and I want to know why."

Another long silence, and finally Buckstone, cool as ever, said, "I must admit, I find this fascinating. You never impressed me as a crazy. Go ahead, tell me your whole fantasy."

"It's a long story. Even nine minutes won't be enough."

"I'll make time. I need a good laugh." He went to the bar, poured himself a small bourbon, and splashed soda into the glass. I⁴ took plain soda. He seated himself, took a sip of his drink, and then nodded for me⁴ to begin.

"Your father's first successful game was 'Upward Mobility.' In the very first version, a character could become President or Pope or Supreme Chairman, control the energy or steel industries or organized labor—"

"Or be the assassin or terrorist or traitor who brought great men down," Buckstone broke in.

"Or anything else. It all depended on the player's idea of ultimate power. And Garth Buckstone's ideas were grandiose. In one version of the game that never went into production, a player could become God."

"Dad was always an innovator. That's what made him a millionaire while he was still in junior high."

"Yes, but he decided against this particular innovation. After all, once you're God, where can you go from there? It's the nature of computer games to keep challenging the player, making the game tougher as the player gets better at it."

"Dad always loved a challenge."

"He did. So instead of trying to become God, he decided to become the devil."

"He never wrote that into any game," Buckstone said.

"No. He lived it."

Buckstone took another sip. "Great story so far, Kilborn. Go on."

"When the really big money started coming in, he moved out of games and began buying up companies. It wasn't just random acquisition. He had a long-range plan. One of the conglomerates he bought owned a company that owned a company that owned a company that owned a laboratory that was doing early work on cloning."

"So maybe Dad made you possible. So what?"

"In the '90s that laboratory received a series of huge research grants. All of them came from companies owned by your father."

Buckstone shrugged. "Smart businessmen invest in research. They keep it quiet so their competitors don't get in on the act. Even you must know that, Kilborn."

"This particular lab was doing research in only two areas: cloning and Gribbensohn's disease." That made the ice cubes in his glass rattle slightly, and he set the glass down.

I⁴ went on. "It's an extremely rare disease of the central nervous system. Only six recorded cases. There's a long incubation period, but once the symptoms appear, the progress of the disease is rapid. There was no cure for Gribbensohn's in 1995. There still isn't."

"Would you like me to fund research on it after I'm elected? Is that the reason for this fairy tale? It's a hell of a way to make a budget request, Kilborn."

It was my⁴ turn to be cool. I⁴ let him glower at me⁴ for a time, then I⁴ took a sip of soda and continued. "Garth Buckstone had Gribbensohn's disease. When it became clear to him in '95 that he was running out of time, he married his girlfriend. He wanted the child she was carrying to be legitimate, because he had big plans for his heir—the White House, Congress, the Supreme Court, probably the Pentagon and the FBI, cabinet offices, and key positions in finance and the media. And, of course, the UN."

Buckstone laughed. "Dad certainly intended me to be a busy little fellow, didn't he?"

"There's an old clone saying: 'Many hands make light work.' As soon as your father was sure that you weren't carrying Gribbensohn's, he had you cloned. It was a very secret operation. Given the public hostility toward clones in those days, it had to be. But your father could afford to pay for secrecy. You stayed with his parents, and the others were farmed out under deep cover. Then he could die in peace. So could your mother, although I doubt that she knew it. How many more are there, Buckstone?" I⁴ shot the question at him quickly, but he was too smart to fall into that trap, so I⁴ said, "Except for your 'doubles' I haven't spotted the others yet, but I figure there's a couple of dozen, at the very least."

He laughed again, louder. He didn't sound amused. "Do you really think nobody would notice if all the people running the country looked alike?"

"Who says they'd look alike? For starters, some of them would be women, some men. All of them would have had cosmetic surgery—more extensive than what was done to your 'doubles.' That was a clever touch, by the way. Everyone who knew about it assumed that it was done to make them look more like you. But they were actually made to look slightly different, just in case someone got suspicious."

"You're generous with your praise, Kilborn."

"Don't thank me too soon. There were dumb touches, too. The voices and gestures of the 'doubles' were too perfect. Solos can't mimic that well."

"They had the best coaches."

"Did they? Nobody ever saw them. That was another mistake. You should have hired someone to play coach. But why did you hire the Lucky Clover Agency? Your smartest course would have been to keep all clones, and especially investigators, as far from this operation as possible. Or was I the big test?"

"You're crazy, Kilborn. You accuse me of having an

army of clones ready to take over the government, maybe the world—”

“Maybe,” I⁴ said. “Your father was always good at takeovers.”

“Don’t talk about my father. You practically accused him of suicide and murder.”

“I suppose I did. I’m not sure what part your grandparents played in all this, either. They raised you, didn’t they?”

“I was an orphan, Kilborn.”

“Of course you were. Couldn’t risk having Mom remarry to some guy who wouldn’t go along with Dad’s master plan.”

“You’ve worked this out like a true paranoid, Kilborn. But you can’t prove a damned thing.”

“Not yet, maybe, but the media might make an interesting story out of it. And once they started digging . . .”

He emptied the glass and got himself another bourbon. No soda this time. When he was back in his chair, he said, “Even if you were able to manufacture some kind of proof, Kilborn, nobody in his right mind would touch this story. Labeling a Presidential candidate a clone might even be considered libelous.”

“Disprove it. You and your ‘doubles’ submit to a DNA scan.”

Buckstone puffed up and looked righteous. “Genetic information is protected under the Fifth Amendment. I will never waive my constitutional rights in order to satisfy the gutter press or some private eye who’s been put up to a smear campaign, and I won’t have anyone in my organization do so.”

“Make up your mind. Am I crazy, am I a Rankin plant, or am I just a blackmailer?”

“Whatever you are, Kilborn, you can’t prove a thing. You can make wild guesses and crazy accusations, but if you do, you’re finished. I’ll see to that.”

“I’m hoping I won’t have to tell anyone. And I’m not looking for a payoff.”

“Let me guess. You want me to withdraw the day before the election, is that it?”

“No.”

He looked genuinely astonished. “No?”

“I don’t decide who becomes President. Neither do you. The voters do. Besides . . .”

I⁴ hesitated, and Buckstone snapped, “What besides?”

“I’ve been following this campaign as closely as anyone, and I think you’d make a better President than Rankin.”

He blinked, looked at me hard for a time, and shook his head as if to clear it. “Then what the hell is all this about?”

“Any American can become President, Buckstone—any American but a clone.”

“That depends on how you interpret the Constitution.”

“We both know how most people interpret it. But let’s put that aside for the time being. Let’s say any American, clone or solo, can become President—but only one at a time. There’s no question of interpretation about that, is there?”

“Of course not.”

“All right, then. If the rest of you want to run the country, there’s a way to do it: go out and win the votes.”

Buckstone had regained his self-possession in a matter of seconds. I⁴ could almost see his brain working. “Assuming that the rest of me exist outside your imagination,” he said.

“Assuming whatever you like. I’ll check out every appointment you make. And if I find one single Buckstone clone slipping into a key position, I’ll set off the alarm.”

“You’re taking on a big job.”

“As I said, ‘Many hands make light work.’ And if anything should happen to me—any of me—the story will be out within an hour.”

“Can you be certain of that, Kilborn? If some unscrupulous enemy were to find and destroy all your accounts of this bizarre fantasy, what then? It could be done, you know.”

“Sure it could,” I⁴ said. “What one person can conceal, another can discover. If I didn’t believe that, I’d be in another line of work. Politics, maybe.”

“Well, then. It would seem that your future is very uncertain.”

“I don’t see it that way. First of all, it would take a long time to find every record I’ve left, and my unscrupulous enemy would never be sure he’d found them all. And second, that kind of a search would require help. How many outsiders do you think my unscrupulous enemy would want sharing his secret?”

Buckstone leaned back and stared up at the ceiling for a time. Without looking at me, he said, “You’re in a dangerous profession. What if you get killed on a case, or have an accident?”

“Maybe my unscrupulous enemy ought to hire a bodyguard for me. A good reliable four-clone,” I⁴ said.

“Maybe he should. Or she. Well, I’m glad we had this chance to talk, Kilborn. Confidentially, of course.”

“Of course.”

When I⁴ left Buckstone’s study, my⁴ shirt was clinging to my⁴ back. I⁴’m not good at bluff poker. Buckstone, fortunately, was no better. It’s a weakness of clones.

Buckstone won in a landslide, and so far, he’s been a good President. The national mood is very positive. Unemployment is below 2.2%, the Dow has broken the 16,000 mark, and the dollar is stronger than it’s been since 2029.

Carillo Flores has a handle on domestic matters. Buckstone is free to be the international statesman, and he’s made a profound impression on the world scene. He’s honored in Africa, trusted in the Middle East, respected in Europe and Asia, admired in South and Central America, and loudly cheered here at home. His schedule is lighter than it was during the campaign, but he still works himself hard. A lot of observers are relieved that he’s learned to pace himself, but they note that he still does about all that one man can do.

That’s just fine. It would be a bad sign if he started doing more. ♦

My Father's Face

Ian McDowell

The night after my father's funeral, his dead face came flopping emptily up the stairs and into my room.

Despite its flatness and lack of shape, I recognized it immediately, as it crawled weakly into the pool of light cast by my nightstand lamp. Frozen in bed, not feeling any emotion I could name, I could only stare as it approached, a loose sweaty bag of flushed red flesh and lemon-colored wrinkles, moving like a cheap rubber Halloween mask pulled by an invisible string. Once, when I was a kid, my father had taken me fishing at Myrtle Beach and I'd hooked a medium-sized octopus. Out of the water, it had gone limp and flat, a living wet dishrag. I'd dropped it in our bucket, but it had slithered out again, and gone sliding along the deck to flop bonelessly over the side.

The face moved like that.

I'd never had a hallucination in my life, not even the one time I dropped acid. Was this what one was like? Had I been that stressed out by the funeral?

No. I hadn't felt anything for him in years.

I put down the book I'd been trying to read, Sir Richard Burton's *Vikram and the Vampire* (grist for a story), and got out of bed. The face stopped crawling and seemed to wait for me,



Illustration by Rick Lieder

spread out all wet and ruddy and pulsating slightly at the edges. I could see the hardwood floor through the gaps between its flaccid lips and eyelids, as though through the holes in a mask. It had left a trail of perspiration behind it, and it stank of that sweat and gin.

Bending down, I touched one cheek. It felt like a boneless chicken breast, raw but still warm, with the skin still on.

That's when I knew it was real, that this was actually happening, that I couldn't deal with it and I had to get away. I ran, out of the room and down the stairs, pausing only to grab a dirty pair of jeans and an old sweater from the hamper in the laundry closet. Downstairs, I put them on and sat shaking on the couch. I was fumbling under the sofa for my Reeboks when I heard a wet slapping noise at the top of the stairs.

"Go away!" I yelled.

The sound continued, coming down the stairs toward me. Shoes in hand, I ran for the door. Fortunately, my keys were in the pocket of my leather jacket, which hung on the coat rack in the hall. Outside, the door shut and locked behind me, I put on my shoes, then walked hurriedly to my car.

I drove around Greensboro for a while, and ended up at Jan's House, an all-night diner. The topless dancers from the club next door were just getting off work. I drank coffee, and ordered a chicken filet sandwich I couldn't eat, and watched the dancers joke with the waitress and each other, and tried not to think about what had just happened.

Finally, when the sun was coming up, I went back to my apartment. The face was gone, but I could still smell sweat and gin. It was a familiar odor.

The afternoon before, I had walked to the casket, looked down at my father's waxy face and not recognized it. Smooth and pink and unlined, it might have been the face of a mannequin, all its ruddy, sagging contours filled in by the mortician's deceptive art. He was never like this when his eyes were closed, I thought. Where's the perspiration, the red cheeks and yellow wrinkles, the smell of Tanqueray?

Of course, that was the face only I ever got to see, the rag-end, the private mask. The people seated in the pews behind me, his somber colleagues from the Drama Department, the pretty graduate assistants and prettier undergraduates dabbing at red eyes, would remember another face entirely. The face they knew was hawklike and commanding, with a Roman nose and piercing grey eyes, the face he wore on stage and in the classroom, at faculty meetings and cast parties, while striding briskly across the campus or holding rowdy court in some local bar. He'd worn another mask for them, all of them, a mask he'd long since stopped deigning to wear for me.

Later in the day, surrounded by graves and umbrellas like a scene from *Our Town*, I hated myself for still being angry. There had been good times, surely, when I was a kid, and we were all each other had. I knew there had been good times. Why couldn't I feel as though they'd happened to him and me?

Everything had been fine for the first few years after the car accident that had killed my mother. We grieved, of course, but the pain seemed to heal, and we became two guys against the world. But I guess the loneliness and loss ate away at him too long, or maybe it was the strain of living for me, of not showing his sorrow and having to get on with the role of parent. Maybe it was Margaret.

He started dating her when I was twelve. I didn't resent her at all; indeed, I was more than happy to welcome a woman into our lives. Maybe that's what scared her, the thought that a commitment to him meant a commitment to me, and she couldn't see herself as a stepmother. At any rate, when the relationship ended, I think that on some level he blamed me.

You can't hold a grudge against a kid, at least, not against your own kid, but he seemed to, and things after that were very different. They should have been better. He finished his doctorate at Duke and got a position in the drama department at UNC; the days of having to scrape by on a high school teacher's salary and tearing his hair out while directing the senior class play at Durham Central were over. Something had curdled, though, and was sour now, and the man who came home each night was increasingly remote. The campus became his real home, the place where he was most fully himself, whoever that was. Our house was just where he slept. And drank. And nodded off in front of the television. And snarled at me for intruding on his drunken solitude.

If the pattern had been a typical one, the teen peer groups would have claimed me, the "wild" crowds and the drugs and all that. But I didn't have any friends, to be either good influences or bad ones, and no alternative to life at home. So I stayed in my room and read the science fiction and fantasy and horror novels he despised, or pretended to despise because they were what I read. And each night I went to sleep with the sound of his head thump, thump, thumping into the wall downstairs, as he lolled drunkenly in his chair and slipped in and out of consciousness. Sometimes I'd get out of bed and creep downstairs and stand there on the landing, just watching him, watching the spasmodic jerking neck, the face lit by the television screen, the face that looked so limp and loose it seemed ready to slough off the bobbing head.

And that's what made me hate myself now, standing among the muddy graves, the knowledge that *that* was my most vivid memory of the man we were burying today. The image of a sweaty, sagging red face with puffy-lidded, half-closed eyes was burned into my brain in a way that nothing else about him was.

Driving away from the tombstones and black umbrellas, I thought again of *Our Town*. Was Thornton Wilder the first person to note that it always rains at funerals? That in turn brought back the next-to-last time I'd seen my father, when I'd come to Chapel Hill for the UNC Playmakers production of Wilder's venerable chestnut, in which he had played the Stage Manager.

We'd exchanged distanced pleasantries after the show, with him seeming more impressed with Adrienne's

cleavage than the fact that Doubleday had finally decided to buy my novel. Eventually, he'd departed for some cast party, to play the familiar role of King of the Revels, while Adrienne and I had driven back to Greensboro. For some reason we took the older route, avoiding the traffic on I-85, and while I navigated unlit, winding country roads, she had gushed about what a handsome man my father was, and asked why we couldn't have gone to the party (he hadn't taken his eyes off her while inviting us). I told her then of all the times I'd come home to find him sprawled in his chair, his eyes almost closed and his lips pursed, his head rhythmically thumping into the panelled wall as he nodded off, snapped back into semi-wakefulness, then lolled back into his stupor, and with the *Tonight Show* band blaring from the TV and a depleted bottle of Tanqueray at his side. I described how his face looked then, like a half-deflated balloon, an empty mask of sweaty flesh I could not believe was him, that I used to half-imagine belonged to someone else, someone older, tider, weaker, stupider than the man everyone else knew, the man I wanted to know, too.

She was quiet for a time after that. Finally, she spoke. "You know, Tom, did you ever think how hard it must have been for him to go to bed alone, after your mother died? Maybe that's why he drank himself to sleep each night in his chair."

I hadn't wanted to hear that, not then, not from her. I said something nasty, I don't remember what, and she said something back, and before too much longer we were arguing, not just about that, but about a host of things. The argument cooled off by the time we got back to Greensboro, but other things must have, too, for we agreed we shouldn't see each other for a while. Thanks, Dad; that's why I came to your funeral alone.

Adrienne eventually heard about the funeral, and called me to say she was sorry. We talked some, and talked some more when she came by after work that night. By the end of the month, we were dating again. I didn't tell her about the face. Most of the time, I managed not to think about it.

Five weeks after I'd buried my father, we were having sex at two o'clock in the morning. Something was still cold and closed off inside me, and any release provided by sex was purely physical, but it was something, and better than sleeping alone. I was getting ready to come when I heard another faint flopping noise above the more rhythmic sound of our bellies slapping together each time I thrust into her. I looked over, past her grimacing face, past the sheets bunched in her hand at the corner of the bed, toward the floor. There was the face again, crawling toward us, leaving its snail's trail of sweat.

I pulled out of her and sat up, my erection dying.

"What the fuck?" she said dazedly. Shaking her head, confusion in her eyes, she sat up. "What is it, Tom?" Her gaze followed mine toward the floor, but she obviously saw nothing.

"I'm sorry," I said hoarsely. "I can explain sometime, but not now. I need to be alone."

She was more confused than hurt or angry. "What is it?"

"I said I can't explain right now. I need you to leave."

My voice was unemotional, toneless. The face had stopped a few feet away from the bed. I wondered if she'd step on it.

She didn't, though, as she silently gathered up her clothes. I made myself look at her as she paused in the doorway.

"I'm sorry, honey. I'll call you."

"If you want." There was concern in her eyes, but I could tell she was now holding back anger. That didn't matter right now.

After she was gone, I got out of bed and walked to the face. It lay there quivering, wet and ruddy and curling up slightly at the edges. I made myself pick it up. It was surprisingly heavy.

If it had tried to curl up around my hand, I would have dropped it, but it was limp and flaccid in my grip, a sagging wet rag of flesh. Biting the inside of my mouth to keep from screaming, I carried it to the bathroom and dropped in the toilet. It lay there in the bowl, and I could see porcelain through its open lips and eyelids. Closing my own eyes, I flushed.

That was a stupid thing to do; it got stuck, of course, and I had to fish it out with the handle of the bathroom plunger. Throwing it down in the tub, I went and found a pair of heavy-duty scissors. The face was creeping over the edge of the tub when I got back.

I cut it into four ragged pieces. The cut flesh didn't bleed, just oozed more alcohol-laden sweat. Picking each piece up with the scissors, I dropped them in the john and flushed them individually. Then I poured half a bottle of Liquid Plumber after them, in case they clogged the pipes.

If I was a character in one of my own stories, this would be happening because I killed him, or at least had done something to deserve the visitation. It wasn't like that at all.

I left home in 1980, over a year after I'd graduated from high school, without the best grades in the world but a sure ticket to Carolina if I wanted it. The problem was, I didn't want it. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was my father's stomping ground, not mine. I couldn't imagine going there.

So I'd ended up working until ten o'clock almost every night at the Intimate Bookshop on Franklin Street and trying to figure out what I was going to do with my life. I was trying to save money for a place of my own, but the job didn't pay that well, and apartments were hard to come by. After I got off each night, I'd spend an hour or two at Sadlack's Heroes or the Waffle House, anything to avoid going home. Eventually, giving in to weariness, I'd trudge down Franklin Street, past the frat houses and public library, to where we lived, just three blocks from the campus.

On the last night we lived together, I came home at ten in the evening after a particularly trying day at work. The day before, I had absent-mindedly walked out of the store with a copy of the hardback edition of *Dark Forces* under my arm, having honestly forgotten to pay

for it, and when I'd come in that morning, I got jumped on by my boss, who had assumed the worst. He chewed me out and almost fired me; I think only the fact that we were understaffed during the beginning-of-the-semester rush had kept him from doing so. Between his snarls and glares and the inane giggles of the freshman girls who'd mobbed us in search of postcards and wall calendars, my day had been particularly obnoxious.

I could hear the *Tonight Show* monolog while coming up the walkway. Joan Rivers was guest-hosting tonight. I could also hear the familiar thumping rhythm of my father's head lolling against the paneled wall.

And there he was when I opened the door, sprawled in the flickering light of the cathode ray tube, his face a flushed wet mask of sweat. I turned on the overhead lamp. The new illumination brought out the red tint in his brow and cheeks and the sallow yellow quality of his wrinkles. This isn't really him, I thought for the millionth time; the man I'd known years ago was gone. This was someone he was too lazy or bitter or indifferent to stop himself from becoming. Standing there in the bright living room, surrounded by director's chairs and bookshelves and tables of old props and knickknacks, I suddenly imagined myself yanking him out of that chair and smashing him, smashing that face, stomping on it until I felt his cheekbones breaking under the heels of my tennis shoes, stomping it away forever. Or maybe just stripping it from him, peeling it off like the soft, flabby mask it resembled.

I walked to the TV and turned it off. That brought him to something resembling consciousness. "What the hell?" he said, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"Just me," I said.

He looked at me, his eyes focusing. "Yes," he said finally. There was no feeling of any kind in the word.

"You need to go to bed," I said. I wanted him out of the living room, so I could stretch out on the couch and watch TV. I didn't want to be driven up to my bedroom the way I usually was by the sight of him.

"Who are you to tell me what I need?" He said it like a line in a play, with a lot of inflection.

"Don't start with me, Dad. It's been a long day."

He coughed derisively. "I'm sure. And now you're home. To eat my food and sleep under my roof. Why the hell aren't you doing anything with your life? You'll be nineteen in two months."

"And you'll be fifty in four. So the fuck what?"

He was out of the chair, reeling but angry. "Don't use that kind of language around me, you ungrateful little rat. Jesus, Tom, if your mother could see what you've become . . ."

I was in no mood to be hearing this, not with his words slurring and gin on his breath. I jabbed a finger into his slight paunch.

"Don't bring her into this, you bastard. I'm tired of you bringing up how disappointed in me she'd be every time you're feeling drunk and mean."

I'm not sure who shoved whom, but suddenly we were grappling. There were no blows exchanged; it was just a clumsy, ludicrous wrestling match. Wrestling had been the only sport I'd ever been any good at. We end-

ed up on the floor with me on top. I shoved his head back into the carpet and glared at him. His face seemed redder and puffier than ever, swollen by surprised rage.

"You fucker," I screamed. "I ought to peel your god-dam face off. Just like a fucking grape! Would you like that, Dad?"

Gasping for breath, we froze, me straddling him, each of us paralyzed by the enormity of the moment. He didn't move when I finally heaved myself off him.

I sat at the bottom of the staircase and held my head in my hands. "I'm sorry," I finally said. "I'll leave in the morning."

"Yes," he said after a while.

"Are you all right?"

More silence, then another dull "yes."

"I can stay in Greensboro and get a job there." My mother's side of the family lived up that way. There were several great-aunts who might put me up.

He sat up, rubbing his side, not looking at me. I turned away and went up the stairs.

I ended up leaving well before sunrise, having called the Trailways depot and found that the next bus to Greensboro was at 5:30 A.M. I packed a bag, crept into Dad's bedroom (he had never come upstairs) and borrowed thirty dollars off his night stand. Yes, borrowed. I left a note saying I'd mail him the money back in a couple of days. And I did.

The TV was on again, the screen full of snow, and my father was snoring in his chair, his deflated face looking bruised and older. But not soft, at least not in the sense of being kind or vulnerable, for all the old resentment was written in every line and pore. Once again, I wished that it was a separate living thing that I could tear from him and smash. I stood there in the darkness, watching the shadows flicker across his sagging countenance, wanting to wake him up to say good-bye. But I didn't know what I could say, so instead I went out the door and locked it behind me. The bus station was only three blocks away.

I ended up staying with my Aunts Flora and Sara. The next fall, they pooled their savings and sent me to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a former women's college whose bland, characterless campus did not remind me at all of my father's old haunts. I got a B.A. in English there, with a concentration in creative writing. There was never any real reconciliation, though eventually we got to where we could talk on the phone, and in my senior year I visited him for a day. He did not come to Greensboro for my graduation.

After his stroke, I went to see him in the hospital. He didn't really recognize me, and drifted off in the middle of the one-sided attempt at conversation, thick lids fluttering closed over his dilated eyes and his face seeming to sink in on itself as it sank back into the hospital pillow.

I found myself getting mad, just like I'd gotten mad when I was younger, mad at that fucking *face* more than anything else, and went lurching out of the hospital, raging at myself as the anger turned over into guilt. I mean, this time, it hadn't been his fault, so where was my patience and understanding? This wasn't him lolling off

drunkenly during Johnny Carson, for God's sake; the man was suffering a major medical emergency. He might die.

He did die. And now I'm haunted by his face.

Is it really there? I mean, Adrienne apparently couldn't see it, but aren't ghosts sometimes visible to only one person? Hamlet could see his father, but his mother saw nothing. Then again, I could be crazy.

Obviously, we're not talking about the most stable of personalities here. The motiveless anger I felt toward my father, and the way in which I externalized it, directed it at his face, that was certainly irrational. That obsessive anger had once led me to practically assault him, and had caused me to get angry at him when he was unconscious and on what turned out to be his death bed. Mix some guilt into the equation, and a mental state that could lead to hallucinations isn't entirely unlikely. God knows, I'm not gibbering with terror the way people are supposed to when they're haunted. Deep down, do I actually think the face is real?

I remember one of my literature classes at UNCG, where we talked about *The Turn of the Screw*. Are Quint and Miss Jessel real, or just in her head? I had impressed Dr. Ramey by citing Shakespeare. It's like *King Lear*, I'd claimed. The storm on the heath is real, but there is a storm going on in Lear's head, too. The outer universe mirrors the inner one. Call me a solipsist, but I think the face is really there, even if I'm the only person who can see it. Even if I am crazy.

Last Friday, I drank myself to sleep in my chair, and awoke to find my face covered by something warm and wet. The sensation was somewhat akin to that of awakening after falling asleep in the tub with the washcloth draped over my face. Trying to touch my own cheek, I felt another one.

Choking back vomit and a scream, I tore the pulsating face from mine and hurled it against the wall, where it stuck for a moment before sliding wetly to the floor. Crying and muttering choked curses, I rumaged through the apartment until I found my hammer. When I returned to the living room, the face was still there, spread out and quivering as if waiting for me.

I pounded it until it was nothing but pink and yellow pulp smeared across a square yard of floor, a sticky wet goo nearly hammered into the very grains of the scarred and cratered wood. Using a paint scraper, I managed to get it all up onto a plastic dustpan. Carrying it out to the back yard, I dug a hole and dropped it in, dustpan and all, then poured lighter fluid from the can I kept beside the grill on top of it and set it aflame. I dropped charcoal and wood into the hole to keep it burning for a while, then covered everything up again and packed down the earth. Back inside, I spent another couple of hours scrubbing the wet floor with pine-scented cleanser.

I knew it would be back.

I also know what it wants, if it can properly be said to want anything. Got advance copies of my novel today. Since it's horror, the photographer tried to make me look sinister on the back jacket by lighting me from below.

Instead, the shadows just made me look old, though I'm barely thirty. In that silly photo, I see traces of another face I know only too well.

I started drinking in college, but it's never really gotten out of hand until now. I never called Adrienne, and she hasn't called me, and so I've been facing each night alone. Until this latest visitation, I'd been regularly falling asleep in front of the TV, since it's hard getting to sleep in bed, and I've typically woken up to Letterman's sign-off or some exploitation movie starring Sybil Danning, my mind fuzzy and blank. One time, I trudged to the bathroom and stopped in front of the mirror, shocked by how much I looked like my father.

The face came back tonight. I'd been drowsing, and then I wasn't. I knew it was there at my feet, even before I looked down. It didn't move. I looked at for a while, then tried not looking at it, then looked at it some more. "I can't fight you anymore," I said. It didn't say anything back. So I kept staring at it. What else could I do?

Finally, careful not to step on it, I got up and made myself another drink.

I didn't realize I was crying until I rubbed my eyes. Kneeling beside the face, I touched one wet cheek. My own cheeks were wet, too. Pulling a box of Kleenex from the end table, I dabbed at my cheek, and then at the one on the floor. After a while, both felt dry. That surprised me. I wouldn't have expected to be able to dry the one on the floor.

My violence last night had not exorcised the face, but it seemed to have exorcised my anger. And my disgust. I wasn't sure what I felt. Before I knew what I was doing, I'd hooked two fingers into an eye socket and pulled the face from the floor. It stuck for a moment before coming up with a sucking sound. Its inner surface was still wet, and smooth and blank, like the inside of a mask.

I carried it to the bathroom and washed it in the sink, rubbing hand soap into it and then rinsing it and drying it with a towel, both inside and out. That done, I stood in front of the mirror, looking at both faces, mine and it. Adjusting it like a Halloween mask, I put it on. "Hi, Dad," I said to my reflection. "At least this way I'll get used to you."

Then I stumbled back to my chair and, after spreading the mouth that covered mine wide enough, drank until I passed out.

When I awoke the next morning, my face was numb. I couldn't feel anything on it. When I looked in the mirror, I saw nothing but my own countenance, if older and tider than ever.

That's how it's been since then. The face doesn't come to me anymore. And if that's because I'm always wearing it, I'm usually not aware of doing so. My own face is all I ever see in the bathroom mirror. By accepting it, I've beaten it, and there's nothing left to remind me it was ever there.

Sometimes, though, passing a store window, I get a brief glimpse of other features on top of mine. And sometimes, at bed in night, or waking in my chair, or even on the busy city street, I'll absentmindedly scratch my cheek, and for a brief moment feel flesh that's not my own. ♦

A Little Night Music

Bridget McKenna



Illustration by Dell Harris

Richie had a theory about guys who did the classics. Richie had theories on a lot of things, but music was his business—rock and classics, mainly; a sprinkling of romantics, a dash of baroque—and he thought about it a lot.

Classicists, in Richie's experience, liked to think they were a cut above the rockboys in their sequins and viddieshades, fixing on the street in groups like some kind of musical circle-jerk, then sitting around Nakamura's or Dai-Tokyo sprung and twitching between buys. The typical classicist liked to shoot up in the privacy of his apt, spend an endless night swimming in a sea of Beethoven, then get up the next morning and play productive citizen like the guy beside him on the mag to work. Come payday, though, he'd be sweating his connection like any other junkie, clutching his money and shuffling his feet and checking his watch in whatever dark place they had agreed to meet.

Vince Raynor was a case in point. Richie had known Vince since junior high; had sold him his first analogs, for that matter, back before they knew what the shit did to you—back before you could go to jail for half your fucking life just for doing a friend a favor.

Vince had a steady job and a good paycheck and a habit that kept him living like a refugee between Friday nights. He rented an ice cube in North Long Beach with barely enough room for him and his hardware. Richie had been to visit a couple times, but it was claustrophobia time in there; a dog couldn't turn around three times in that place to lie down.

"Right now, Richie knew, Vince would be waiting for him in the riverbed under the mag tracks, pacing a ditch in the cement. He topped the rise and started down the side, whistling. A voice shot out from the shadows: "Stop that goddamn noise! You're fifteen minutes late!"

"Nobody's more punctual than a hype," Richie observed. "What'll it be tonight?"

"Cut the shit, man. You know what I like." Vince stepped into the light, looking like a drowned man in the sodium glare of the lamps that lined the riverbed. Fortunately or otherwise, until the rains came again, nobody was going to drown in the green-brown smear of turgid liquid creeping down the center of the Los Angeles River's flat, cement floodplain.

"Fresh out of motes tonight. Tell you what, though. I'll cut you a deal on some bait—six hundred for a first of the fifth."

"Five hundred, and you throw in a third of the ninth for another four. And I'll need some other stuff to get me through the week."

"Everything's for sale, man." Richie reached into his pocket and drew out a handful of shining ampules with yellow dez marks bleached white by the lamplight.

Vince picked out two black ones that read *Beet/SY05.1* and *Beet/SY09.3*, then rummaged through the rest for some minor pieces. "Fucking Haydn. I hate Haydn. This is the second week in a row you've been short motes." He plucked out some minor concerto movements, frowning.

"I've got some Bach in the other pocket."

"Spare me. How much for these?"

"Another eleven hundred, but you're robbing me."

"Yeah. I always do. That's why you go home with all my money every Friday night." He pulled some bills out of his pocket and counted out two thousand dollars.

Richie pocketed the cash. "No, I go to my supplier with your money. Then I go to the friendly neighborhood patrol, the detective lieutenant in charge of this corner of the county, and the vice boys. Then I go home with what's left. Let's go do some beers at Nakamura's."

Vince smiled for the first time since Richie had arrived. "You're buying."

They walked up the sloping cement walls to the maintenance road. Far overhead a westbound mag hissed by, sluicing through the smog. A fire burned in the space under a nearby bridge, and several figures huddled around it. With the nights getting colder and available shelter scarcer, the riverbed had turned into a regular little city.

Vince put an arm around Richie's shoulders. "Sorry I blew you shit back there, Rich. I've been short for two days. I felt better as soon as I got these in my pocket, you know?"

"You're short, you come to me. Your credit's not only good, it's spotless—you've never used it."

"I don't want to start, either. I'm living on ramen as it is, but I've still got some pride and I'm not asking love from nobody."

"Well if you ever need it, I got it. And it ain't charity, dumbshit, it's friendship."

"So what's with the shortage of Mozart all of a sudden?" Vince wanted to know, as they approached the street. "Seems like there was always plenty until maybe two weeks ago. What's with the supply?"

"Dried up like old piss. I asked the Doc about it plenty of times since then—you're not the only classicist on my rounds, you know—there just isn't any. I'll keep on him, though, and you'll get first chance at anything I get."

Nakamura's was dark, dingy, crowded, and short on oxygen, like always. Richie surveyed the bar from the doorway at the top of a short set of steps leading down to a pit. Conversations floated up on the smoke in English and Japanese and something in between. From up here it looked like some kind of human feedlot smelling of beer and sake and sweat, a massive herd of backs and heads and raised glasses, all overlaid with a sort of braidead *bonbonie*. It felt just like home.

Richie waved at Nina and she pointed out an empty table by the window. They sat down, and Richie turned over the "Reserved" sign which now read "Thank you for not smoking."

Outside, the neon sign above the window crackled as it flashed on and off, spattering the table, the sidewalk and the people sitting on their bedrolls on the sidewalk with bursts of hot pink and turquoise light. The bottom of the window was at eye level, and the people outside sat and stared down at them. It always made Richie feel like he was on exhibit, or maybe onstage. He smiled and waved like Miss America.

Nina stepped up to the table. Her face was done up scenic, like a desert with canyons and a sunset. Her eyes peered over the horizon at him, startlingly blue. Richie stared.

"I'm Arizona," she informed him. "The usual?"

"But of course. What time you get off?"

"So that's a Kirin for you and a Guinness for your friend. Stuff grows in that, Vinnie."

"Yeah, but it's nutritious stuff."

"Nina, you're breaking my goddamn heart," Richie persisted. "You gonna go out with me or what?"

"I'm gonna bring you a beer, Rich. That's my job." She flashed him a dazzling smile.

"Don't do it for me, honey—do it for Johann." Richie pulled three light blue ampules from his pocket. "Third Brandenburg."

The sun went down over Arizona as Nina's smile faded.

"You're a real shit, Richie, you know that? I get off at one, but I'm not fucking you for the Third Brandenburg."

"I'm not asking you to. Let's just go out and have a good time—see a show or something. I'll be here at one. Me and my three friends—*Allegro, Adagio, and Allegro*." He flashed the ampules and slipped them into his breast pocket. She *would* fuck him for the Third Brandenburg, he knew, and he looked forward to it with the relaxed anticipation of a done deal. "You seen Smith?" he asked her as she turned away from the table.

"Smith Jimied last night. Gone to the farm. I'll get those beers."

"Shit!" Vince looked paler than usual. "Smith Jimied? No way! He never did that shit, he was strictly Beethoven—maybe some romantics. . . ." He stared across the room at nothing, shaking his head.

"It's a popular misconception that you can't jimi on the classics, Vinnie. It's not the kind of music, it's the purity. It's an *analog*, remember? That's the point. The real thing would probably turn your brain to tofu. It doesn't matter what goddamn *century* it comes from. Maybe not as many guys go to the farm on Beethoven as on Burton, but they go. Oh, yeah, they go." His hand shook as he picked up his beer, and he wasn't sure why.

"Smith. Shit." Vince looked up at Richie. "Did you sell him the tune? I mean, is it possible?"

Richie slammed the bottle down on the table. "Don't even ask, man. You're supposed to be my friend, so don't ask me shit like that. You come to me 'cause what I sell is good, but it's not too good, *wakaru*? The Doc knows just how to stomp it so it's safe, but still gets you off. I mean, this guy's a legend on the street—you know that. Nobody's ever Jimied on the Doc's 'logs. Smith must have gone somewhere else for the tune."

Vince shook his head, rose unsteadily to his feet. "Sorry, Rich, I didn't mean anything, you know. Listen, man, I gotta go." He pulled a ten from his jeans and slapped it on the table. "That's for Nina. We'll do the beer tomorrow night."

"Sure, Vinnie. Tomorrow night it is," Richie answered Vince's back, already halfway to the door. That boy wouldn't be going anywhere but straight home to Ludwig until he ran out of 'logs again, sometime near the end of the week. Right now, Richie knew, Vince needed the solace of a symphony; a chemical chain-letter straight to his temporal lobes that would leave no room for poor old flatlined Smith or anything else in its total invasion of his conscious functions. It was just too bad it couldn't be Mozart.

Richie did his music through his ears; not for him the rude invasion of the hollow needle at the tip of an analog ampule, or the quick, steep chute to addiction. He was a *diarua* and a professional. Let those other fools worry about which ampule had the looney tune; Richie might not be as smart about some things as Vinnie was, but he always knew when he went to bed that he wasn't going to wake up on the organ farm.

The beers came, and Richie ran a tab. He usually paid Nakamura in 'logs—the guy had a real thing for Rhodes and Burton solos. You had to love a guy with those kind of traditional values. Richie scanned the crowd for his regulars; time to do some business.

Koyama came over and sat down. He picked up Vince's abandoned Guinness and took a swig. "Jesus, that's real cowpiss, isn't it? Hiya, Richie. Vince take off already? I just got paid. I wanna buy some shit. You hear about Smith? Wonder where he got that tune? *Zan'en, ne?*"

"Yeah, too bad. You want to buy or you want to talk?" Richie wasn't in the mood for Koyama's verbal diarrhea, and he particularly didn't want to hear any more about Smith, or any speculation on who was selling looney tunes. It sure as shit wasn't Richie, and he wished everybody would get off the fucking subject.

"How you fixed for Hendrix and Van Halen?" Koyama asked. Another guitar solo junkie, our Mister Smallmountain. Nobody did Lennon & McCartney, and nobody did Simon & Garfunkel, and nobody did Barry Manilow. Lyrics weren't the thing; the music was the thing, and it had to be real, and it had to be personal, and it had to have guts; it had to be music you could feel with your soul. A poem set to tune, even a great poem with a terrific tune, well, you might as well put it in your ear.

On the other hand, a guy going off on his own, leaving the band back in some other dimension and making a guitar do things you couldn't be sure it was ever designed to do, like all those great old dead players—well, that was personal. That was real. That was music for the sake of music. Some favored the Baroque, Classic or Romantic periods' version of real; others preferred to fly closer to their home century.

"I got all you want," Richie promised, pulling a handful of tiny multicolored ampules, like exotic beetles, out of his pocket and spilling them out onto the tablecloth. Koyama picked and paid.

The following Friday there were still no motes in Richie's bag. Vince was so incredibly pissed, Richie threw him a couple violin concertos for free.

"So what's with your man, Rich?" Vince said, walking crabwise up the concrete slope of the riverbed to the road. "Three weeks and no motes. He lose the fucking recipe, or what?" He looked to be in sorry shape despite the seven ampules warming in his hand; he had picked up some kind of nervous cough, and his eyes were a little red. Maybe it was just because it was payday.

"Hey, you're just a little sprung," Richie told him. "It won't be long, now. I promise. I've been keeping after the Doc about your motes. Just stick with me."

Vince gained the road and waited for Richie to catch up. "I've been sticking with you," he said, taking Richie's hand and pulling him up over the lip, "Now I'm thinking about going somewhere else for it."

"Aw, don't do that, Vinnie! Shit, I mean it. Don't take chances like that. That's probably what happened to Smith. At least with me, you know you're safe."

Vince pocketed his logs, passed Richie the cash. "Am I, Rich? And if I am, is that the important thing? I don't know anymore."

Thursday Richie got a message from Doc. "Come early to pick up the weekend bag," it said. "And let's talk

about your friend who's strung out on Mozart. I've got something special for him."

Richie regarded the dark blue ampule. The dez read *Moz/SY29.01*. "What's so special about it?"

Doc was scrutinizing the progress of a batch of mole-cules assembling themselves to his instructions. When they were done, tiny dark-skinned women from Cambodia and Nicaragua and Kuwait would package them in shining plastic; add a stubby, razor-sharp needle; stamp them with the appropriate designations; and place them in little zipper bags, like candy for the kids' lunchboxes. It was a regular little cottage industry at Doc's place, all so some junkie's lobes could experience a musical composition in the same mathematical purity as the composer had first heard it, without the crude interface of the human ear. Richie didn't understand the science, but he could appreciate the smooth workings of the machine that provided his living.

It was hot in the lab, and Doc's black face shone like polished wood. He took a white cotton handkerchief from the pocket of his lab coat and wiped at the perspiration. "Let's say it's a cut above the usual street pieces," he replied. "I think your friend Vince will be able to appreciate it, that's all."

He reached back into his pocket and withdrew four more blue ampules. "I have the rest of it here, but let's give it to him one movement at a time, shall we? We want him to wake up, after all."

"I don't get it," Richie said. "Why aren't you charging him for it? What's the catch?"

"No catch at all. I think perhaps Vince Raynor has the ability to appreciate what's in these. The rest of your half-assed classicists out there wouldn't know a really good 'log if they fixed one. These are a fucking work of art, Richie, and not only on the part of the late Mr. Mozart, I might add." He chuckled, looking like some sort of beatific African cherub.

"I've got your word he's not going to jimi on these? The guy's my friend—I'm not going to give him no looney tunes."

Doc's smile disappeared. "If I tell you to, Richie, you'll give him cyanide. Let's not forget who works for who here." He reached out and closed Richie's fingers around the blue ampule. "Tell him I want a record." He wrote down a number. "This is my modem. He's to call this number, leave his voiceware going, start talking as soon as he fixes, and keep talking as long as he can. If I like what I get, we'll talk about the second movement."

Vinnie was overjoyed to get the motes—he thought the 29th was about the most perfect fucking piece in the world, or so he had told Richie maybe two dozen times.

"Free," he kept saying over and over, even after they got to Nakamura's and had beers in their fists. "Free. I don't get it."

"Jesus, shut up about free, why don't you? If I'd known you were gonna keep saying that all night, I'd have charged you five hundred and kept it. Yeah, it's free. A little present from the Doc. So shut up already."

There was never any music playing in Nakamura's. Nakamura and most of his regulars being analog junkies, music taken through the ears was considered a kind of torture. The noise was made up of the clatter of bottles and glasses and *sake-chobko*, and dozens of relentless conversations. Over the years, Richie had gotten used to the absence of tunes in most of the places he frequented, but every now and then he wouldn't have minded having a jukebox to throw dollars into.

Nina brought their beers without asking. "These are on Nakamura-san. He says don't forget to stop by the office on your way out. Shit, he does so many 'logs and you drink so much beer, I think he doesn't know anymore who owes who."

"That's okay," Richie said, "'cause I know. Tell him I'll come by. Oh, and I got something for you."

Nina looked down at him, raised one eyebrow.

"No obligation. Look." He opened his hand to show her a button, blue with white Old English letters. It read: "If it ain't Baroque, don't fix it." He reached up and pinned it on her sweater.

"Hey, Rich, that's sweet." She touched his face briefly.

"I'm the fucking king of sweet. You need anything, you come to me."

"I need *music*, I'll come to you. And this time, I'll pay for it in cash." She winked and walked away.

"What is it with you hypes and your pride?" He asked Vince, slightly wounded.

"You've never been tempted to fix, have you?" Vince rolled the log around in his fingers, a kind of horny smile beginning to form on his face.

"Not tempted enough. I've got ears."

"You don't need them when you've got this."

"I also don't need to come up with eight kay a month to hold onto what little sanity I've got. And I can still get it up for the girls, unlike any hype I know. No thanks, Vinnie. I feel sorry for guys who got hooked before they knew what this shit does to you, back when everybody thought 'logs' were just harmless fun, but people like you and Nakamura, and even the lovely Nina over there, you knew."

"You're right there," Vince agreed. "We knew. Maybe we just didn't believe."

"Some kinds of addiction they know how to cure, you know? If they clean out a guy's receptors and he gets off the shit and then goes back, maybe he was fucked up some other way. You people, on the other hand, have been fucking your brains in ways the experts don't even understand yet. They almost never get somebody off 'logs,' you know."

"I could come off. Some come off," Vince said, a bit too casually.

"Oh, yeah, and I've seen a few of them. I believe in the walking dead, now, Vinnie, 'cause I've seen them coming out of the rehab."

"Well, I'd sooner be dead than not be able to do this. I know you'll never understand why, but I keep trying. When you do your music this way"—he pointed a fingerneedle at his inner arm—"you find out things about music you never knew. It's not just sounds. It's thoughts

and emotions and things even more basic than that—formulas, the true names of things, maybe—you know?"

Richie'd heard it all before, and it never failed to piss him off in some way he didn't quite understand; tonight it was worse. "I don't know," he snapped. "I don't want to know. To me, it's a business. You need something, I supply it. I don't get the deeper reasoning behind your addiction; I just profit from it."

He frowned into his beer bottle. There was a black knot in his stomach about the size of Doc's head. It had been there ever since he had left the lab with the special Mozart 'log in his pocket.

"A composer—a great composer—is like a great magician, when you think about it that way," Vince went on, oblivious of Richie's mood. "He has the power to create something that's entirely real, by speaking its true name. Only that name, Rich—it isn't words, not like we understand the idea of words. A great composer, when he encodes those notes, he's creating something—something magical, even—and it has a piece of him in it, too, if you know how to listen for it—it has *bis* name in it."

"I've listened to music, Vinnie; even your classic shit. It's not like I'm totally ignorant."

"But that language, Richie—it wasn't meant to be heard. It was meant to be experienced directly, like the composer did when he first got the music in his head. Maybe . . . maybe only composers ever knew that experience in the first place, and the best they could do for the rest of us was put notes on paper, so someone could make them come out of some instrument. When you do a 'log, the music's in your *brain*—like it was in *bis* brain. You don't have any idea how that changes you."

Vince sat back, eyes closed. A tear leaked out of the corner of one eye and hung for a moment before racing down his cheek and splashing onto his jacket. He didn't seem to notice.

"You're right. I don't understand. I just hope you get out of that 'log whatever you want to get out of it, and nothing you didn't want."

"I'll drink to that," Vinnie said, pocketing the 'log and patting his pocket. He drained his stout and signaled Nina for another round.

Richie called Vince's apt a couple of times on Saturday, just to check on him, but there was no answer. He thought about going by, got as far as getting on a train to Long Beach, but got off at the Cineplex and saw a movie instead. Fuck Vinnie. He'd be in touch when his shit ran out; they're all glad to see you when the shit runs out—dealers got lots of friends on payday. He'd see him Friday night under the mag tracks.

As it turned out, it only took Vince until Sunday to track Richie down. He'd gone home Friday night and done the first of the twenty-ninth, following Doc's instructions. It was the best he'd ever had. Saturday night he'd done a third of the fortieth, one of the pieces that had cost him money, and it was like shooting water. The guy was totally strung out. Richie promised to go back to the Doc and get him the second movement if he could. It wasn't something he felt especially good about.

* * *

"Second movement, Twenty-Ninth Symphony," Doc intoned, dropping the ampule into Richie's hand. "No charge, of course, but only one movement per week."

Richie wasn't buying Doc as philanthropist. "There's always a charge," he snapped. "You never did anything for free in your life. What's he paying you with, *really*? What are you getting out of him?"

Doc reached out and touched a switch on a console and Vinnie's voice faded up into the room, dopey and slow, like a man awakened from sleep.

"It's water . . . light on water . . . the spaces water occupies and the spaces around those . . . sound finding its own level . . . as though this were the only . . . right sounds . . . the right places for these notes to fall . . . that's it, then . . . no other notes are possible but these . . . just these."

There was more of that, then just breathing for maybe a minute, then: "It's snowing. Mama's waving goodbye in the snow, and the carriage is pulling away with me and Lieserl and Papa, and I try to keep seeing Mama, but soon there's only the snow and the carriage. I'm cold, Papa. Will it be snowing in Vienna?"

Doc touched the switch again, and the voice stopped.

"That's it? You're ruining what's left of this guy's life so you can keep his dreams?"

"I don't think you're capable of understanding the smallest part of what I'm doing here," Doc told him, a slight smile twisting one side of his mouth. "You're a good employee, Richie—let's leave it at that, shall we? Just keep delivering what I provide like a good boy. Just like you did for Smith."

Richie's heart thumped hard. "Like I did? What do you mean, I did? I never sold Smith that bad tune!"

"Surely you remember calling me for some extra Beethoven for Mr. Smith when he cornered you in the middle of the week? I provided, you delivered."

"But that wasn't . . ." Richie's voice trailed off. God. He felt like he was going to pass out, and steadied himself against a table, shaking.

"Mr. Smith was participating in an experiment in the maximum allowable levels of signal purity in a chemical music analog," Doc continued. "He bought his music all over town—he would have Jimied sooner or later anyway; they all do."

"Jesus, you're some kind of monster. And what does that make me? What am I doing helping you do this shit?"

"Staying off the street, that's what you're doing. Off the street, and out of the joint. You like having a job, and you like having a place to live—a lot of people don't, these days. You like walking the street a free man who doesn't have to bend over to stay alive."

He walked closer and grabbed Richie's jaw in one huge hand. "Trust me on this, Richie," he said, squeezing his face in a grip like iron. "There'd be nothing worse for a piece of sweet white meat like you than a couple of years in the joint. They'd break you like a cheap toy, and you'd thank them for it 'cause you'd be alive. Alive and some con's brown-nose piece of ass is still better than dead."

He shoved Richie away, and Richie fell against a rack

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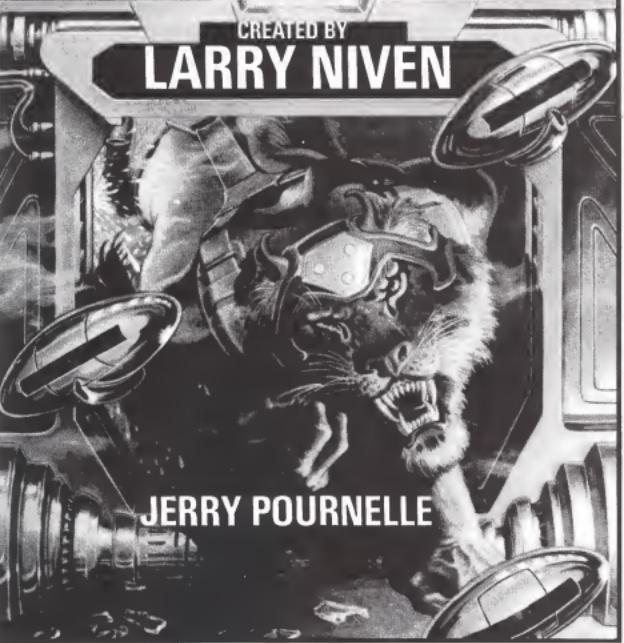
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of glassware that tinkled and chimed briefly, almost like a melody you could never repeat.

Richie opened his fist. The ampule was safe.

He watched things fall apart through the rest of the symphony. Doc grew more and more restless, pacing the lab and starting at small sounds while he played Vince's tapes over and over. Finally, he sent all the little brown women home and locked up the production room.

Vince was getting thinner and pastier-looking every week. Nothing Richie said made him feel any better—nothing he did except to hand over Doc's special 'logs as soon as they were handed to him at the tortuous rate of one a week; Vince didn't care about anything else now, anyway.

By the time Vince had done the fifth movement, Richie could hardly recognize him in the trembling wreck that sat across the table from him at Nakamura's. The guy looked fifty years old; his nose was running, and he kept dabbing at it with a damp handkerchief. Richie didn't know whether to be sad or disgusted or just pissed off, or who to be pissed at. Okay, he gave Vinnie the logs, sure. Who wouldn't? One phone call and Doc could have him out of his apt and out of a job, maybe lying in an alley bleeding to death, or on his way to jail. And wouldn't Vinnie have taken the logs from anyone Doc had deliver them, anyway? So what was the point?

"It shouldn't have been me, that's the point!"

"Huh?" Vinnie looked up. "You say something, Rich?"

"Yeah. I said I'm being used. You're using me to get off, and Doc's using me to suck your brains out through your nostrils." He took hold of Vince's shirt and shook him. "Do you give a shit? We both know *he* doesn't, but *do you*?"

"You going to see Doc tonight, Rich?" All Vinnie could hear, it seemed, was Doc's magic name.

Disgust was burning a hole in Richie's stomach. He let go of the shirt and wiped his hand on his jeans. "I don't need to see him. I already got what he wants to give you."

Vince's hand shot out and gripped Richie's arm like a vice. Richie jerked the arm back, but Vince held on. "Don't make me wait, man," he said, and it was begging—something Vince never did. "You know I can't wait. The other stuff—it's no good to me. It's like that one 'log a week is all I get, now."

Richie stared at Vince. Vince let go of the arm and wiped at his nose some more. "I haven't been to work all week, did you know that?"

Richie shook his head. "No, man, I didn't." Vince always prided himself on going to work. Going to work was what separated him in his mind from hundreds, thousands of prowling, strung-out types stealing from their families and friends, or selling skin back in the men's room to see their way clear to the next fix. "I didn't know that."

He took a small black box out of his jacket pocket and set it on the table. "Message from God," he said, sliding the viddie across to Vince.

Vince pulled up the screen and hit the play button.

"Mr. Raynor, we meet at last!" Doc's voice said cheerily. Richie pulled his chair around to see Doc's broad black face filling the tiny screen. "My faithful messenger has delivered what will be my first and last personal communication." Doc beamed at him from the screen. Richie wanted to puke, but he didn't look away.

"I always knew you were special, Mr. Raynor," Doc continued. "Your appreciation for the classics in general, and for the works of Mozart in particular, led me to single you out from the masses of analog addicts congesting the streets of our city for some of my very exceptional product. But the most special product of all is yet to come."

Vince shot a look of pure desperation in Richie's direction. Richie handed him the large silver ampule Doc had given him a few hours ago. The ampule pulsed with reflected neon light in Vince's palm for just a moment before his fingers closed on it and he clutched the fist against his chest.

"You have confirmed for me things I often suspected about the effects of music analogs on those who were equipped to experience them; things, I'll admit, I was not willing to risk addiction to find out personally.

"Don't get me wrong, Mr. Raynor. I'm in this business for the extraordinary financial rewards, not for art, but I've spent a lifetime studying the classical composers and their music. I've read diaries and letters and contemporary accounts, listened to thousands of hours of music." He smiled again, and pointed at his head. "Through my *ears*, you understand. I don't have to tell *you* about the signal-to-noise ratio problem, I'm sure.

"Because I wasn't willing to give my life up to the kind of hopeless dependency you seem to take for granted, I have only probed the *mind* of Mozart. You, my poor, doomed friend, have touched his *soul*. That is why you can never go back."

Richie looked over at Vince. His eyes were focused intently on the screen, and his shaking had stopped.

"I've been feeling something watching me, something closing in," Doc went on. "Competitors? The Feds? Maybe just my own inner anxieties. Whatever it is, I've decided to get away for a while—a few months, a few years, perhaps. There are plenty of other businessmen just waiting for a chance to satisfy the needs of all those other music lovers out there, and I've provided for Richie's safety from any legal backlash from our association. He should be able to pick up work with any reputable supplier in the city, with the recommendations I've provided.

"With this ampule"—he held up the silver log on screen, and Vince opened his hand to see it safe there as well—"I have also provided for you, Mr. Raynor. One of your favorite pieces, I'm sure: Mozart's 13th Serenade in G—*Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. Have you ever noticed how like a perfect miniature of a symphony it is?"

"Mozart did things, with this brief composition, that lesser composers would struggle to accomplish in vast suites, heavy with useless strings of melody—don't you agree? Did you know there were originally five movements? One was removed and thought lost for some time. As luck would have it, it was only misplaced.

"Now why did Mozart, your musical idol and soul-brother, remove a movement from the 13th Serenade?" He held the ampule up and stared at it, as though the answer might be written on its skin. "Did he shorten it because it improved the piece? Perhaps not. Perhaps the piece was already too good. Perhaps something had to be removed to make it . . . safer—the way I tone down the purity of my chemical compositions to protect the safety of my customers." He shrugged philosophically. "Who knows? Mozart knew, and tonight you will, too." The screen went white.

"Vinnie, you're not going to fix that looney tune," Richie said, reaching for Vince's hand. Vince pulled the hand away. "Why don't you give it to me, and I'll stomp it into the pavement for you? Then you can go back to getting off on the occasional *romanza* and quit fucking around with the nature of reality, okay? Please, Vinnie?"

Vince shook his head, smiling. "You're never going to get it, are you, Rich?"

"No, I'm never going to get suicide. Sorry."

"Your man's going away, Rich. This is the last of the best, and he's fixed it so I can't do with anything else. This is the one I had to have all along." He held the ampule between thumb and forefinger. "Lucky Thirteen."

"You know you're going to jimi. Yeah, why the fuck not? You throw your life down the toilet, you might as well flush, huh?" Richie could hear his voice cracking like a kid's. A couple of people at the next table turned to look at him. "You could quit, Vinnie. You said so yourself. It won't kill you."

"Rich." Vince put a hand on Richie's shoulder and shook him gently. "I'd kill myself. Besides, why would you want me to quit? You'd lose your best customer."

Richie shook off Vince's hand. "You think you're my best customer? I got a hundred guys buy more shit than you. What I don't got is a customer who's a bigger pain in the ass! Shit, Vinnie, what I don't got is another friend."

"Me neither," Vince admitted. He reached up and put his hand alongside Richie's face, and Richie tried to read his eyes, but he couldn't understand anything he saw there. "How about I give you one chance at it?" Vince tossed the 'log into the air.

Richie grabbed for it as it tumbled. It brushed his fist with a tiny cold touch, and Vince swiped it out of the air and plunged the hand into his pocket. "You lose, *tomodachi*. I gotta go."

Richie lowered his arm, let out his breath. "Hey, don't be in such a hurry, okay? You gonna let me buy you another beer."

"Sure, Rich," Vince said. "I've got plenty of time—I'll stick around for one more beer?"

Richie woke up five or six times in the night, finally giving up and making coffee around six, but it was the middle of the afternoon before he could bring himself to call. There was no answer.

He caught the next mag to Long Beach. The city went by in a sickening blur and he squeezed his eyes shut, his forehead hot against the cold window.

The train stopped a few blocks from Vince's apt, and Richie walked down the gray walk between the gray buildings and wondered if there was a tree left in L.A. that hadn't been chopped down for firewood.

Up ahead, a boxy white vehicle waited at the curb, engine running. Two guys wrestled a gurney down a flight of steps and onto the sidewalk. Richie started running. God, don't let be the farm wagon, he pleaded, but Richie already knew about God.

Vince lay on his back—awfully, silently asleep. The constant junkie anxiety and the restless, searching look were gone. One hand rested on his chest, fingers closed loosely, with the tip of the silver ampule peeking out.

"Excuse me, buddy," said one of the attendants. He moved around Richie to pull the arm straight, slap up a vein and jam a needle into it. Richie must have made a sound, because the attendant looked up at him as he tapped the needle down and hung a bottle of clear solution on the gurney. "You a relative?"

The ampule rolled off and bounced silently onto the sidewalk. Richie bent down and picked it up. "No. Just passing by."

"Well, why don't you pass on by, then? We got a job to do."

There was a slight smile on Vince's mouth, frozen there, no doubt, since his mind had taken off into the night with Mozart, maybe on that carriage to Vienna in the snow. He looked like he knew something, and maybe he did, Richie thought. Maybe he knew the answer, whatever that was.

Richie didn't even understand the question. ♦

Journey

J. H. Ulowetz



Illustration by Rob Alexander

You stare at the gloomy door in front of you and wonder who you are.

You stand at the end of a hallway. The walls and ceiling around you are whitewashed stucco. Behind you, the hallway—somehow you feel it is endless—fades into brown haze about ten feet back. The door is made of a dark, moody wood. Hints of cobwebs trim the edges. Bands of rusted black iron wider than your hand crisscross the portal in a giant X. Your vision is drawn to the round silver doorknob on the right side of the door. The doorknob is covered with

dozens of spines radiating outward. You gasp at the sight.

Between you and the door lies a long kitchen knife, the kind that is used to carve up a roast. It is simply resting on the slate floor, its tip pointing at you.

You look down at yourself. You are wearing a white robe, like a hospital gown. Or is it a burial shroud? You know there's a difference, but you can't remember what. The robe covers your body but leaves exposed the white skin of your arms and legs. Your feet are bare, but the slate floor is comfortably warm to the touch. Your hands are also bare: no rings, no bracelets.

Probing through your robe, you find you are male, although the implications of this elude you. You feel your head: bare of all hair, but the skin is soft and smooth, even on your chin. The plump skin of your hands is like that of a newborn infant. You can't remember anything about yourself. There is a poignant awareness that you need something. Vanishing feelings of love, of belonging, of tenderness. All gone now; gone with your identity. The loss hammers at your soul and you cringe in anguish. You want everything back, but—

The door is in your way. You look at it and see your fear. You want to be brave, but you can't. It's as if the part that would enable you to understand all this is part of what's missing. The loss, the pain, the knife; the doorknob. You are completely terrified. You try to tell yourself that there is no need to be afraid, that it's only a door. You fail.

You conclude you really are happy in the hallway after all and will stay here. You start backing away. You don't want anything to do with the door, or the knife, or . . . yourself.

You turn and flee into the brown haze.

Much later, you again stand before the gloomy door. You are still terrified, but you find that you grow tired—and perhaps a touch afraid as well—of simply wandering the endless hallway. Alone, with no one but yourself.

Clenching your fists, you work on maintaining your courage. Your fingertips press against the dry, cracked skin of your palms. Looking at the backs of your hands, you see liver spots stretched over protruding bones. You suddenly feel sick in the pit of your stomach. How long has it been?

You move closer to the door. It is as you remember it. From that other time. The silver spines on the doorknob prevent you from using it, so you look for some other means of opening the door.

The knife is still lying there; you can use it to jimmy the latch, you think. You pick up the handle; it is smooth in your fingers. Inserting the knife between the right side of the door and the frame, you move it up and down searching for the mechanism.

Nothing.

Perplexed, you search all sides of the door with the knife. There is nothing but the hinges, no other resistance or contact of any kind.

Of course! It isn't latched at all, you realize. You move back to the right side of the door and insert the knife

again, but this time you press sideways on the handle to use it as a pry bar.

The door won't budge.

You try again, holding your breath and pressing so hard you fear the blade will snap, but the door doesn't move in the least.

Exhaling, you move to the left side of the door and bend close to look at the three hinges, wondering if the blade could be used to pry out the pins. Giving it a shot, you chisel off some flakes of rust obscuring the middle hinge pin. The iron underneath is very solid; the pin itself is almost an inch in diameter and eight inches long.

There is no way that the knife could be used against that much metal, so you inspect the wood. The vertical planks that make up the door are fitted together smoothly; you carefully examine the entire door and nowhere is there any gap where you are able to insert the blade.

You place the tip of the knife against the wood and try to gouge off a piece. There is barely a scratch; the planks are so hard they seemed to be petrified.

You try other approaches, using the knife to prod and pry and cut, all without effect. You take off your robe and use it to wrap the doorknob. All you manage to do is slice up the cloth. You hammer against the wood, kick it, even plead with it. You spend ages coming up with different solutions to opening the door without hurting yourself. All your attempts fail. In the end you curl up in a ball against the door and cry yourself to sleep.

You wake up eventually and brush a thick layer of dust off your body. How long did you sleep? You stand up and look at the door. A feeling of calm has descended over you; your rest seems to have helped. You decide it's time now; no more avoiding it. Time to open the door and move on. And how does one open a door? With the doorknob, of course. But what if the doorknob is covered with needles?

You already know the answer.

Stepping forward, you lift your right arm and slowly close your hand about the doorknob and the spines. The skin of your palm erupts in a hundred points of pain and you jerk back. Blood is flowing from numerous spots, and your hand begins to feel numb.

You wonder about poison, but you know that there is no alternative. Get this over with before you lose your nerve. Your hand touches the needles again; the pain is less severe this time, perhaps because of the numbness that is spreading through your hand and lower arm. You contract your hand until the spines poke out the back. You turn the knob.

The door gently opens toward you.

Exhaling a sigh of relief, you release your grasp and start to pull your hand away. It won't budge; the spines hold it in place. The numbness is replaced with a burning sensation, and your hand is swelling and turning bluish-black.

You use your other hand to try to pry off your fingers. You can't get them to budge at all. The pain is intensifying, and the swelling is moving up your arm.

You brace one foot against the door and pull as you scream from the agony, but still no movement. You

place your other foot against the door and let your entire weight pull on your hand, and you scream and scream, but it still won't release.

You rest your feet on the ground and look down a moment with blurry eyes. There is a shape there. The knife. No, please, you cry; not my hand! You bend over and pick it up; a distant part of your mind is amazed that it just happens to be within your reach. You examine the blade for a moment in your shaking grasp. Your right hand is very swollen; no way to try to cut out the spines now. Only one path is available.

You cry, asking yourself why you had to open this damn door. You could have stayed in the hallway; You didn't need to do this. Tears and sweat flow as you bring the blade against the swollen thing on the end of your arm. You can't think of it as your hand anymore, not now.

You do what you have to do. . . .

You regain consciousness, lying on your back. You open your eyes and lift your head to look at your right arm. It ends at the wrist; the ragged end of your arm is covered with a black scab.

Your stomach heaves, and vomit mixes with the blood on the warm slate floor. You wonder why you didn't bleed to death; you had passed out from the sight of your arm separating from the thing which had been your hand. The swelling in your arm might have compressed the major arteries. You don't believe that, but it doesn't matter what you believe, does it? Your arm probably stopped bleeding just to spite you, like everything else seems to be doing.

You look around. The door is still open. For a moment, but just a moment, you smile weakly; tears run down your cheeks and fall to mix with the red stain on your gown. The door is wide open; the doorknob and its new covering are out of sight next to the wall. This side of the door looks the same as the other except that it has no doorknob. Beyond the doorframe the hallway continues, but it fades into a green mist that promises something wonderful.

Supporting yourself on your left arm, you get your feet under you and stumble forward. After going a few feet past the door, you remember the knife. The thought of what you used it for still makes you sick, but it might prove useful. As you turn back to retrieve it, the door slams shut in your face.

The message is obvious, even to you. You turn again and walk forward into the mist, happy to finally be free of the door.

Soon the light begins to increase and the walls around you seem to fade away. You perk up and start to hope that the worst is behind you, that you may be close to getting some answers.

The surface under your feet turns liquid and you fall into water. You scream. Struggling to swim, you discover that it is only chest-deep. You stop struggling and stand up, looking around.

The mist around you thins, and you see plants nearby: ferns, reeds, an occasional water lily. You are in a

swamp. Hidden below murky water, the soft soil engulfs your toes. The dense, hot air makes it difficult to breathe and muffles all sounds.

Looking around, you can't see any landmarks. You are very angry, but you finally calm down and decide that there is nothing to do except to pick some random direction and begin walking. You quickly develop a rhythm. Pull one foot out of the ooze, drag it forward, set it down while hoping you don't step on a sharp rock too often. All the while you fight the drag from your water-soaked gown. You continue to do this for what seems like eternity.

Eventually you notice a large shape peeking through the murky swamp air ahead of you. When you are close enough you make out a wooden shaft a foot in diameter that stands about twice your height above the water. A name comes to your mind: totem pole. On the side of the pole toward you are six carved faces, one above the other, with expressions of pain and terror. And sitting on the top of the pole, as out of place as it could be, is a colorfully decorated bucket. It looks like it belongs in a child's sandbox, not here. Not here at all.

You wipe the sweat from your eyes and your vision is drawn back to the faces on the totem. You notice the slight oriental cast to their features . . . at the same time you realize that there are now only four faces.

You glance down at a clump of vegetation and walk around it to get closer to the totem. The next time you look up, there are five faces and they show confusion with their knit eyebrows and tense mouths. You stare at the pole, eyes wide, waiting for it to change again, but nothing happens. After a few moments the sweat flowing down your face makes you blink . . . and the seven faces, African in appearance, seem to blink back at you.

Growing more confused by the moment, you try to move around and see what the other side of the pole looks like. You can't move through the swamp without taking your eyes off the pole, and every time you look back at it a different set of faces are visible and always facing you. It is as if the pole is turning to keep one side to you, but just like the changing of the faces, you can never catch it in the act.

If there is a message here, you don't get it. You move closer to the pole, looking up at the bucket balanced at the top. Suddenly your right foot encounters a soft, fleshy mass. You instinctively pull your foot back, but appendages like fingers close around your ankle and you feel hair as thick as seaweed brush your calf.

Frantically you push away, kicking and twisting as nails or claws dig into your skin. You scream, twisting and beating your arms against the water to push away. The world becomes a blur in your panic.

Suddenly your foot is free. You keep going as fast as you can in the restricting water, constantly looking over your shoulder and trying to peer beneath the murky water for signs of pursuit. All you can hear above your ragged breathing is the blood pounding in your ears. You nearly die of fright every time your foot touches a stone or plant underwater.

After what feels like eons, the terror lessens and you

become aware of the stinging sensation in your foot. You eventually pause, reaching your hand down into the cloudy water and touch the flaps of your skin and muscle floating like seaweed where the claws cut you in your struggle for freedom. As the panic from your flight fades, the stinging in your foot becomes pain which in turn becomes a torment which becomes—

Using your hand and your teeth, you rip off one of the loose strips of material from your robe. You try to watch for signs of pursuit while struggling one-handed and balancing on your good foot. Screams (yours) echo through the swamp as you eventually manage to coerce your flesh back into the rough shape of a foot.

You lean back in the water and rest for a long time. You are comfortable and decide you like it where you are, but eventually you grow restless, uneasy. Supporting yourself in the water on one foot, you look around. The swamp looks much the same as before. Overhead is a cloud layer that could begin at ten yards or ten miles. Dull grey light seeps through, giving no indication of where the sun is or what time of day it is. In the swamp itself are reeds and water lilies and other miscellaneous plants that you don't know the names of. You begin moving again, using the water to support your weight as you favor your right foot.

You travel through the swamp for a long time, limping. So far the plants have been pretty bland, but up ahead now you see a large rosebush covered in flowers of many different colors. When you reach it, you see that it too is growing out of the water; you are surprised since you think that a rose requires dry land to flourish. You are disappointed because you thought you had finally found a way out of the swamp.

Looking closer, you identify red, yellow, pink, and white flowers, as well as colors you had never seen before in a rose: the blue and tan buds are unusual, but the single gold blossom is spectacular.

Avoiding the thorns, you gently pull the gold rose down to where you can smell it. It has the spicy aroma you expect, but mixed in is some exotic scent, like saffron. Sighing, you release the stem; such beauty doesn't belong in this dismal place.

You turn to your right to walk past the bush and continue on your journey. As you do so, a branch suddenly sways as if from the wind and brushes your left arm with a thorn. You snatch your arm away and see that the thorn has broken off and is deeply embedded in your forearm just above the wrist.

The price of enjoying a little beauty. You start to reach for the thorn with a right hand you no longer have; the sight of the stump is a painful reminder of your plight.

After suffering a moment of depression, you turn your attention back to the thorn and raise your left arm to your mouth to pull it out with your teeth. When you do, you see that the thorn is covered with tiny cilia in constant motion. As you watch, the thorn begins to burrow into your skin.

Horrified, you frantically brush at it with your right forearm to try to knock it out, but it is too deeply embedded now. In desperation, you raise it again to your

teeth and bite down to pull it out. The last quarter-inch of the thorn breaks off in your mouth, and you can feel tiny movements probing your tongue.

Gagging, you spit it out as fast as you can, and continue spitting to be sure it is really out. When you are certain it is gone, you hurriedly check your left arm again. The remaining piece of the thorn has burrowed completely under your skin. You can see the small bump it makes. You are so terrified you nearly get sick again. You tense and wait to see what happens next.

Nothing. There is a slight feeling of discomfort, but not much pain. You consider gnawing at the spot to get the thorn out, but the idea of putting it back in contact with your mouth is worse than leaving it there. It is located in the only spot on your body that you can't reach with your remaining hand; there is nothing you can do. As usual.

You are still standing near the rose bush, so you carefully back away and then turn to continue your journey.

As you take your next step, your left arm explodes in pain. The suddenness causes your knees to collapse and you fall face down into the water.

You inhale a lungful of water while you are gasping from the torture in your arm. You reach out desperately for support, but there is nothing nearby. You strain to cough out the water, but you seem to take in as much as you spit out. You are sure you are going to drown.

Your surroundings become less distinct and your vision darkens. Your struggles lessen in intensity as your body begins to give up the fight. The pain in your arm has stopped, but it is too late to help now. Images flash before your eyes, but they are images of emptiness, of voids, of loneliness. The empty hallway; the endless swamp. This is your life, and now it is ending without the chance to find what was taken from you. It isn't fair.

I won't accept this, you cry to yourself.

You dig your toes into the sand under the mud and straighten your knees. You can no longer see and have little sensation in your body, but you hope that you have lifted your face out of the water. You command your chest to contract to clear it of water, but there is no response. Your lungs have apparently given up hope. You try to wrap your arms around your chest and squeeze, but there is no leverage. Through your arms you can feel the pounding of your heart weakening.

Your mind is shutting down; you only have moments of consciousness left. You want to live! In desperation, you bring your left arm to your mouth and bite down on the spot with the thorn.

A jolt of fire rushes through your body and you gasp. You concentrate on the reflex and contract your chest muscles. Water trickles out of your nose and mouth. You repeat the action again and more water comes out.

You gag and cough while trying to inhale deeply.

You just stand there for a few minutes while you learn to breathe again, savoring the feeling of being alive. Tears run down your already wet cheeks and you shiver; that was very close.

There is no sensation from the thorn now; there is only the small bump in your arm denoting its presence.

You brace yourself for the possibility of more pain, and take a step forward.

Your left arm explodes in agony again. You are ready for it, but still you stumble and end up turning somewhat to the right. As you do, the pain diminishes. Angry but intrigued, you turn more to the right and the ache decreases still more until it finally stops. You try turning further, and the sensation starts up again.

You can take the hint. As you limp through the swamp, leaving the site of your nearly fatal struggle behind, the thorn occasionally gives you small tweaks to correct your direction. Either your sense of direction is much worse than you thought, or the thorn is leading you in circles. When you see the totem pole ahead, you decide that the former must be correct. You stop, but the thorn urges you forward, straight to the mysterious pole. The faces continue to change every time you blink or look away. Still sitting on top is the child's bucket. A few feet away from the pole, bubbles percolate to the surface amid an area of disturbed water. You suspect—no, you *know*—that the bubbles come from the hairy monster. You keep a wary eye on the bubbles to make sure they stay a healthy distance from you.

The thorn is urging you forward with repeated small stings, but you resist. You aren't stupid. The tweaks from the thorn become more frequent, but you aren't going to go any nearer. You brace yourself for pain from the thorn, and back away.

All sensation from the thorn stops. You pause for a moment in astonishment. Raising your left arm to your face, you see that the skin is smooth, no bump. You are free of it!

In joy, you hurry away from the totem pole and the beast, keeping an eye on the bubbles until they are out of sight. You tell yourself that you are free now to do whatever you want. Nothing threatens you now. You can go anywhere you desire. Well, almost anywhere, but never mind that.

You feel good about yourself. You remind yourself that you almost died from the thorn and are glad to finally be free of it. Why, if you hadn't shown such strength you would have ended up on the bottom of the swamp, just like . . .

Just like the thing in the water by the pole.

You feel a touch of sympathy for it, for him. Someone else stuck in this damn swamp! Your sympathy for him, like any strong feeling of yours, turns to anger. None of this is fair! You smash your left hand down hard on the water, accidentally splashing yourself.

As you turn to go, you almost miss the hole in the water where you splashed. Almost, but not quite. Looking back, you bend over to stare in disbelief. There is a shallow depression where you struck. You watch as small ripples move across the surrounding water, travelling down into the depression and back up the other side as if it is the most normal thing in the world. Reaching out, you touch the depression with your fingers, generating tiny waves. You reach into the water and cup up a small amount. There is now a small dent in the side of the depression.

You try to remember: is this normal behavior for water? You don't think so, but you're not sure what to think. You try scooping out more water and succeed in deepening the depression, but you can't move much water only one-handed. You need—

A chill of understanding creeps up your spine and you stand perfectly still. For a moment, the quiet swamp sounds around you hush completely in silent expectation. The child's bucket. Someone stuck underwater; someone who might become an ally in your journey, if you can just move enough water to bring him to the surface.

For a moment, doubt creeps into your heart and you despair. There is so much water to move. And how will you get the bucket away from the hairy man in the first place? But you resolve to try, whatever the price.

An idea comes to you. You start searching the swamp bottom with your toes for pebbles, pieces of roots; anything that you could throw. As you collect your prizes in a fold of your robe, you realize that many things could go wrong: you might not be able to throw left-handed, or the bucket might sink instead of floating to you when you knock it off the totem pole. The hairy man could even interfere. But you hope it's time that you had a bit of good fortune.

Overhead, the sky seems a little brighter. ♦

The Eighties: Son of Fantastic

Mike Ashley

When Sol Cohen passed full ownership of *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic* to his partner, Arthur Bernhard, the editorial offices of Ultimate Publishing moved to Bernhard's home base of Scottsdale, Arizona. Ted White chose not to continue as editor, mostly because of the lack of infusion of money into the magazines, and he returned to their authors all of the manuscripts he had accumulated for upcoming issues.

Bernhard was left with no new material, and no editor. He brought in the husband-and-wife team of Scott and Elinor Mavor, who ran a graphic design studio in Scottsdale. They became the editorial and production staff. Bernhard felt that a woman's name as editor might not be well accepted by the readers, and he also wanted to boost the number of names on the magazine's masthead, so he invented the persona of Omar Gohagen to take over the editorial reins. Considering that *Amazing* had enjoyed a golden age under Cele Goldsmith, this deception was not entirely logical thinking on Bernhard's part. And it meant that the name of *Amazing*'s eleventh editor (twelfth, if you include Hamling; see the table on page 51) was a fabrication, something that did not help to improve the magazine's image.

Admittedly Elinor Mavor started with a significant handicap, seeking to put out a magazine in a matter of weeks with no new material. But at the outset there was no evidence that any effort was going into the

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magazines. The April 1979 issue of *Fantastic* and the May 1979 issue of *Amazing* were dreadful. They looked cheap, contained only passable reprints and a couple of amateurish new stories, and gave every indication that the magazines were reverting to the drabness of the reprint issues of the late 1960s. It seemed as if all that White had achieved in the 1970s had been destroyed in one fell swoop. There was also created the impression that the Mavors did not understand their market. They started a reader-participation graphic story called "Mecano Sapiens," which makes me shudder to even think of it. This kind of feature had dropped up occasionally in sf magazines over the years, and never had worked.

I recall receiving these issues with despair and writing a hasty alarm-bells letter to "Omar Gohagen," pleading that something be done. I received a pleasant postcard from Omar, acknowledging my views but remarking that most letters the magazine was receiving showed that readers were pleased with what was happening. And indeed, so it seemed from the letters appearing in the letter column. Mind you, I was a little concerned about what some of them were saying:

"The thing about the new *Amazing*

that strikes me most is the look," wrote one reader from Sweden in the February 1980 issue. "It's beautiful!" Well, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but that opinion amazes me. In that same issue another reader wrote, "I just picked up a copy of the August *Amazing* and was overjoyed. 'The Council of the Drones' was one of the best SF stories I have read in years! Yours is the best SF magazine in the business." I wonder what else this fan was reading. "Council of the Drones" by W. K. Sonnemann was a reprint from the October 1936 issue. *Amazing* might have been attracting a readership, but it didn't seem to be one totally *au fait* with science fiction or its magazines.

The evidence of circulation figures might be a better measure of the reception of the magazine. Its newsstand sales dropped from almost 21,000 in White's last year to around 16,400 in Mavor's first. While some of this decline may be attributed to a lack of promotion of the magazine and the chronic distribution problems, it must also be true that the magazine just failed to make an impact on the stands, "beautiful" or otherwise.

Nevertheless, I was delighted to find that over the next few issues, both magazines improved. It became

clear that Elinor Mavor was making an effort to develop them. She introduced some attractive illustrative features, such as Stephen and Chip Fabian's graphic story "Daemon" in *Fantastic*, and brought in new artists, of whom the most stunning was Gary Freeman. In fact, within a year, with the artwork of Freeman, Fabian, and (later) Alicia Austin, *Amazing* was indeed verging on "beautiful."

The fiction was also looking up. Mavor disposed of the reprints as quickly as possible, although retaining a classic reprint department in which authors provided new introductions to their old stories.

Mavor introduced some talented new writers. It would be no surprise that, having started with an empty inventory, she might have selected some poor early stories, just to get an issue together; and though it might be uncharitable to say so, I think most of the new authors discovered in the first few issues appeared because of these fortuitous circumstances. But among the rocks was the rare glitter. The August 1979 *Amazing* carried "The Inevitable Conclusion," the first published story by Michael Kube-McDowell. He became a regular contributor to the magazine over the next few years before establishing himself in the wider field. His "Antithesis" from the February 1980 *Amazing* was highly regarded. It's a clever piece of scientific double-speak in which a student finds a loophole in Einstein's theories. The November 1979 *Amazing* introduced Wayne Wightman, who would become closely linked with the magazine for some time thereafter. Wightman was a powerful writer and satirist with challenging new ideas. His stories began to set a standard for freshness in the magazine.

Gradually some of the bigger names returned to *Amazing*, writers whose individual approaches to fiction suited the flexible policy of the magazine. Writers such as David R. Bunch, Barry Malzberg, Marvin Kaye, Darrell Schweitzer, Garry Kilworth, and Greg Benford were joined by new writers Brad Linaweafer, J. Ray Dettling, and Lawrence Connolly. None of these authors gave *Amazing* any clear direction, but they gave

the magazine a vitality that it had not seen since the early 1970s.

Then a bomb was dropped. Seeking to cut costs, Bernhard decided to merge *Fantastic* with *Amazing Stories*. The last issue of *Fantastic* appeared in October 1980. That magazine had been published for 208 issues over twenty-eight years. If you include its pulp godparent, *Fantastic Adventures*, had survived for 337 issues. And now, for the first time in forty-one years, *Amazing* had no sister publication.

The first combined issue was dated November 1980. The magazine shifted from a quarterly schedule to bimonthly—though this meant only six issues a year compared to eight of the two magazines—and increased slightly in height, adding half an inch to its digest dimensions, presumably so that it would poke above the other magazines on the newsstand rack (a gimmick that only lasted a few issues).

With this issue Elinor Mavor was revealed as the true editor, and Omar Gohagen was cast into the pit of oblivion. At last Mavor was receiving personal credit for her hard work.

There was one other change, the logic of which still escapes me. The full title of the magazine, which had reverted to *Amazing Stories* after Ted White left, became *Amazing Science Fiction Stories* again, even though it also boasted "combined with *Fantastic*." Why the magazine should choose to promote itself as "science fiction" when, for the first time, it was publishing a fair quota of fantasy remains a mystery. This development underlines a more significant matter, which I shall return to later.

The new combined *Amazing/Fantastic* had a buzz about it that was thrilling. It was attracting exciting writers—Harlan Ellison, Alan Ryan, Hank Stine, Somtow Sucharitkul, Lisa Tuttle, George R. R. Martin, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Roger Zelazny, Orson Scott Card, Richard A. Lupoff—all of whom were not afraid to try something new and different. By 1982 the stories in the magazine were once more turning up on the Hugo and Nebula Award ballots. George R. R. Martin's sf-chess

story "Unsound Variations" (January 1982) came in third in the Hugo voting. Brad Linaweafer's "Moon of Ice" (March 1982), a new twist on the Nazis-won-the-War theme, was likewise highly regarded. No less a luminary than Andre Norton praised the story and urged Linaweafer to expand it into a novel. Ernest Hogan debuted with a controversial story, "The Rape of Things to Come" (March 1982), which elicited much reader reaction to its projection of commercialized rape. There was also John Steakley's consideration of courage and human dignity in an alien-occupied world, "The Bluenose Limit" (March 1981), which Barry Malzberg commended as "a stunner."

The fiction, the artwork, and the variety of nonfiction features (from interviews to story analyses) gave a good balance to the magazine and an indication of an editor who was thinking and experimenting. In three years with the magazine, from a standing start, Elinor Mavor had worked miracles.

But as 1982 dawned, Arthur Bernhard, now seventy years old, gave notice that he wanted to sell the magazine. Although he had invested no money in promoting the publication, he cared for the venerable old title and wanted it to have a good home. Alas, an experiment in cost-cutting had proved a failure. In 1981 Bernhard had reduced the print run of *Amazing* from around 66,000 to 53,000, yet the magazine maintained newsstand sales of 17,000. Thus, Bernhard saved on production costs without suffering a decrease in income. But the next time he tried the same tactic, cutting the number printed to 43,000, there was a savage drop in newsstand sales down to 10,600. *Amazing*'s survival was on the borderline.

By February 1982 Bernhard was in negotiation with a number of potential buyers—one of whom, Jonathan Post, even went so far as to advertise for submissions. The successful purchaser, though, was TSR Hobbies, Inc., the company that had established itself as the producer of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game. The trail that led to TSR began with

George Scithers, who had recently stepped down as editor of the successful *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. Bernhard offered the magazine for sale to Scithers—who, although he didn't have the capital to go through with the purchase himself, told a friend at TSR about the availability of the magazine. During the first week of March 1982, the sale was agreed upon and Scithers was hired as the new editor. Elinor Mavor's last issue of *Amazing* was dated September 1982. She bowed out gracefully and poignantly, remarking how much she loved the magazine. That sentiment showed. Her style and approach remained evident in the magazine for some time to come, and her love and devotion had given the magazine hope if not certainty.

TSR was already producing a successful gaming periodical, DRAGON® Magazine, which carried a piece of fantasy fiction in each issue. Purchasing *Amazing Science Fiction Stories* gave the company an opportunity to expand its publishing line in a new direction.

Scithers operated out of Philadelphia, supported by a team of first readers and assistants (known colloquially as "the Zoo") which at the start included John Ashmead, Darrell Schweitzer, John Sevcik, and Meg Phillips. Thus, *Amazing* was being edited long distance (the same circumstance that had ultimately led to Scithers's departure from *Asimov's*), while production personnel were based at TSR's offices in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.

Although Scithers was not nominally involved with production, he was in charge of the magazine's design. In this respect, the first noticeable feature of his version of the magazine was how much it resembled *Asimov's*. The similarities could be seen in the design of the contents page, the move to single-column text instead of the traditional two columns, and the cover art. In fact, Scithers acknowledges that the design format for *Asimov's* as well as his incarnation of AMAZING™ Science Fiction Stories was copied from a format that had been devised by Fred Dannay and first used for *Ellery Queen's*

Mystery Magazine—which was, like *Asimov's*, a Davis publication.

(Editor's note: The above change in the designation of the magazine's name came about immediately after TSR Hobbies, Inc., purchased the title, whereupon the company filed for the right to ownership of the title "Amazing" as a trademark. Beginning with the September 1984 issue, at which time the trademark became registered, the magazine was known as AMAZING® Science Fiction Stories.)

Less surprising was the editorial similarity between the two magazines. Scithers brought his customary urbane style to bear upon the editorial and nonfiction features. He also purchased material from many of the same authors he had encouraged at *Asimov's*, and this was most evident in the cases of Somtow Sucharitkul and Avram Davidson. Both of these authors brought with them story series that they had started in the pages of *Asimov's*, Sucharitkul with his stories about Aquila, set in an amusing alternate reality where the Romans had conquered North America, and Davidson with his ever-indefinable "Adventures in Unhistory."

What was surprising was that the magazine retained its digest format. There was some speculation among fans of the magazine at the time that TSR might expand AMAZING Stories into the slick format, matching the presentation of DRAGON Magazine. That this did not happen was seen as an indication that perhaps not as much money was going to be injected into the magazine as its followers had hoped. But TSR did put out a considerable amount of cash in the early days in paying off all the outstanding manuscript contracts (originally written as "pay on publication" agreements), raising the rates for new material to match what was being paid by Asimov's and Analog, and commissioning a cover from Michael Whelan for the first all-Scithers issue, November 1982. (Subsequent issues were a mixture of Mavor-bought and Scithers-bought material, until all of the old inventory had been used up.)

The Scithers-era magazine was ever readable. It had lost some of

that excitement that had started to bubble in Mavor's issues, but it could always be relied upon for solid, dependable fiction. A particularly notable issue was that for November 1983. Its attractive George Barr cover illustrated "Eszterhazy and the Autogondola-Invention," one of a series of delightfully unconventional stories set in a world-that-really-should-have-been and featuring the exploits of Dr. Eszterhazy as recounted by Avram Davidson. In the same issue was "Homefaring" by Robert Silverberg, where, in the first time-travel experiment, a man's mind is projected millions of years into the future. He finds himself coming to terms with the lobsterlike creatures whose society becomes reality to him. Both of these stories were nominated for Nebula Awards. Also in that issue was "Cyberpunk," a first sale by Bruce Bethke about near-future youths in a world dominated by technology—the story that ultimately gave its title to a whole sub-movement in science fiction.

The potential for wide appeal in AMAZING Stories was evident from the attention given to William Wu's story, "Wong's Lost and Found Emporium," from the May 1983 issue. This piece was nominated not only for the Hugo and Nebula Awards, but also for the World Fantasy Award. This story was also converted into a screenplay and produced as an episode of *The New Twilight Zone* television show. Two other stories by Wu set in the Emporium have also appeared in AMAZING Stories, most recently "Missing Person" in the April 1992 issue.

The magazine was also attracting writers, both new and established. Not only were there stories by Frederik Pohl, Damon Knight, Keith Roberts, Tanith Lee, and Gardner Dozois, but also by developing writers Michael Swanwick, Paul J. McAuley, and Richard Grant. A surprise but welcome visitor was Andrew M. Greeley. This somewhat unorthodox Catholic priest, who had written such best-sellers as *The Cardinal Sins* and *Thy Brother's Wife*, had only once before stepped into the world of legend, with *The Magic Cup* (1979), an Irish version of the tradition of

the Holy Grail. Now, for the first time, Greeley extended his talents to short fantasy fiction, starting with "The Great Secret" (September 1983), wherein a lord in a timeless world strives to discover the secret of the cosmos without realizing, as love takes control over him, that perhaps he had already found it.

One golden opportunity presented itself in 1984. Universal Studios leased the title of "Amazing Stories" from TSR to use as the name of a science-fiction anthology television series to be produced by Steven Spielberg (although the Spielberg connection was not made public at the time when Universal contacted TSR). The series, launched in the fall of 1985, featured mostly original material directed by many leading names. Yet, despite being able to proclaim "Now a TV series . . ." on the cover, the magazine gained no advantage from this series. Perhaps its only effect was to see the magazine revert to its original title, AMAZING® Stories, with the March 1986 issue.

Regardless of the quality and entertainment value in AMAZING Stories, its newsstand sales refused to rise appreciably. At the beginning of Scithers's tenure, newsstand circulation was at around the 11,000 mark. That was only a little behind most of the other digest-sized fiction magazines; and after a time, sales rose to the point where AMAZING Stories was outselling *Asimov's* on the newsstand. However, it must be noted that this period was not a good time for any fiction magazine on the newsstands—a situation that has persisted to the present day.

The main reason that the other science fiction magazines remained far ahead of AMAZING Stories in overall circulation was that each of them had a substantial subscription base of tens of thousands, whereas, at the time that Scithers took over, subscribers to AMAZING Stories numbered less than a thousand. During Scithers's editorship, subscriptions almost tripled. This did not come about through any promotion on TSR's part (though some readers may have leaked over from DRAGON® Magazine), but was probably caused by the devoted core of active science-

fiction fans (as distinct from passive readers) who returned to AMAZING Stories in support of Scithers.

Nevertheless, despite this encouraging increase, the existence of the magazine was always on a knife-edge, and further rationalization took place. It was seen as no longer practical for Scithers to edit the magazine long distance, and in February 1986 he departed. He would soon establish himself as editor of the newly revived *Weird Tales*, thus giving him the unique distinction of having edited both the first fantasy magazine and the first science-fiction magazine.

Scithers's editorial duties were taken over by Patrick L. Price, who was already experienced with the magazine after having served as an assistant editor (based in Lake Geneva) since the September 1983 issue. There were some superficial changes, including a revamped contents page of which many readers approved but which I found confusing. And there were more solid changes: Martin H. Greenberg, renowned multi-anthologist, came on as editorial consultant, and a new art feature, "On Exhibit," was established.

In the all-important area of fiction, Price wrote in his inaugural issue (September 1986) that he wanted the magazine to return to its origins: ". . . the primary focus of our story selections will be in the areas of hard and speculative science tales, militaristic science fiction, and space fantasy or opera."

This brings us back to the issue that had surfaced earlier, and that is the extent to which fantasy had begun to dominate AMAZING Stories. It is a quite fundamental issue. When Hugo Gernsback launched *Amazing Stories*, he was most emphatic in his statement that the magazine would carry stories based on experimental science. It would not feature anything that might not be possible some day through scientific achievement. Any other stories he regarded as "fairy tales."

Although the science in many of the stories through the years may have been questionable, the magazine remained more or less true to this vision until the moment it was merged with *Fantastic*. In trying to

retain the balance of the two magazines, fantasy became a regular feature of *Amazing* and, at that point, it ceased to be *Amazing Stories*. It had, in real terms, become *Fantastic*. That latter publication had always had a wide base to its contents, and though its title suggested it was a fantasy magazine, it frequently carried science fiction, usually of a surreal or avant garde nature.

I had noticed this phenomenon at the time it occurred. Whereas my heart sank at the thought that we had lost *Fantastic*, a magazine I had always enjoyed, my mind soon told me that the magazine I was reading was no different from *Fantastic*.

It was a dilemma from which there was no escape. Despite Price's wish to promote more science fiction in AMAZING Stories, that turn of events never really came about. To be sure, hard sf stories did appear—Robert Silverberg's "The Iron Star" (January 1988), John Barnes's war story "Delicate Stuff" (July 1988), Robert Sawyer's space adventure "Golden Fleece" (September 1988), and Greg Benford's superb Venerian expedition "Alphas" (March 1989)—but the bulk of the fiction, and the general overall feel of the magazine, was fantastic. Much of the best fiction being written was not hard sf, which has become a rarity. Most scientific or speculative sf has merged with the fantastic, creating a form of mainstream fantasy.

AMAZING Stories was not alone in this situation. Only *Analogs* remained the one true science-fiction magazine. *Asimov's* carried a balance of fantasy and sf, as did, most obviously, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. In fact, based on fiction alone, it was difficult to tell these magazines apart. *Asimov's* had higher quality, as a rule, but both AMAZING Stories and *MFSF* could be relied upon to produce individualistic and off-trail stories.

For instance, AMAZING Stories published "Etchings of Her Memories" (March 1987) by Richard A. Lupoff, a quite extraordinary story treating the octopus as an intelligent creature and considering the nature of its civilization. (This was a story I'm sure Gernsback would have ad-

mired.) Then there were Paul Di Filippo's challenging AIDS story, "Kid Charlemagne" (November 1988); Lawrence Watt-Evans's poignant tale of a search through multiple realities, "An Infinity of Karen" (September 1988); and a whole squad of excellent stories by Kristine Kathryn Rusch.

The magazine could also draw upon its glorious past, not in reprinting stories but in presenting new material by writers whose early works had been part of science fiction's formative years. It celebrated Jack Williamson's sixtieth anniversary as a writer with a new story, "The Mental Man" (November 1988), and also presented "Wodan's Army" (January 1989), a new story by Lloyd A. Eshbach, who was also nearing his sixtieth writing anniversary.

Yet, despite all this potential, the magazine's circulation failed to rise. Perhaps if TSR had undertaken a direct subscription drive the effort would have had some effect, since subscriptions were continuing to rise (albeit slowly) of their own accord. Instead, most of the company's promotion for the magazine took indirect forms, through a series of paperback novels published under the AMAZING Stories banner and two sets of anthologies edited by Martin H. Greenberg that reprinted stories from old issues of the magazine.

The absence of a breakthrough in circulation was a source of frustration for Price. In 1988 he discontinued full-time employment with TSR, though he continued to edit the magazine on a freelance basis. Then, toward the end of 1989, a rumor surfaced that AMAZING Stories would cease publication when the material that Price had already purchased

had been used. It was galling, to this and other long-time readers, to think that after all the work that had gone into the magazine in the 1980s to make it an exciting and challenging publication, it would now be left to die.

That you are reading this article is proof that it didn't. In the summer of 1990, TSR quashed all the rumors by announcing that the magazine would be expanded into a new slick format under a new editor, Kim Mohan. Price stayed on, managing production of the digest-sized issues until his inventory had been exhausted with the March 1991 magazine. He, like all of his immediate predecessors, had demonstrated a strong commitment to the magazine, producing quality issues despite the hardship of scanty distribution. His issues will be among the least known, since print runs were down to a little more than 30,000, yet they contained more quality than most of the pulp issues in total.

The magazine's current incarnation is too recent a development and too close to home to form part of this history. The new-format version of AMAZING Stories is for historians of the next century to judge.

Instead, let us pause to consider the legacy that has come down to us over the last sixty-six years. Almost the whole of the science-fiction genre that exists today owes its existence to Hugo Gernsback's launching of *Amazing Stories* in 1926. He created science fiction as a distinct marketable commodity, which other publishers then developed and promoted. Gernsback's original desire was to create a form of fiction that put entertaining frills on a core of

scientific facts and speculation that would inspire its readers to engage in experimentation and invention. Little of that kind of science fiction remains today, although I suspect that most space fiction still inspires the frontier spirit in us all, the desire to explore beyond the realms of our planet.

But the world has changed. When *Amazing Stories* was born, America had not long emerged from the horse-and-buggy days. People were still ignorant of the potential of science, and Gernsback was correct in his missionary devotion to develop an understanding of science so as to build a new and better world.

Today we live in a science-fiction world. Just about everything around us would have amazed a reader of 1926 if he were suddenly transplanted to today. That is not to say that science fiction has outgrown its usefulness; it can still inspire and stimulate, just as Gernsback originally intended.

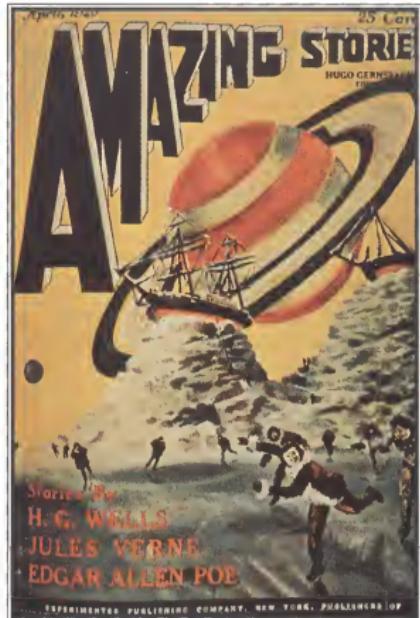
But let us not forget the core of his original purpose: to create a new and better world. There are many who now believe that science is killing this planet and endangering the whole of its flora and fauna. If Gernsback were alive today, he would direct his scientific zeal toward solving that problem. AMAZING Stories is as pertinent now as it ever was. Its durability over sixty-six years is a lesson in itself. Its readers are probably more aware of ecological issues than many of their contemporaries. Whereas once science fiction was created to build a new world, it can now work as a force to help save it. That will be the amazing story of the 1990s. ♦

The Editors of AMAZING Stories, 1926-1992

Editor	From	To	Issues	Total Number	Period in Office	Editor	From	To	Issues	Total Number	Period in Office
1 Hugo Gernsback	4/26	4/29	37	3y 1m	9 Harry Harrison	12/67	9/68	5	10m		
2 T. O'Conor Sloane	5/29	4/38	91	9y 0m	10 Barry N. Malzberg	11/68	3/69	3	6m		
3 Raymond A. Palmer	6/38	12/47	93	9y 8m	11 Ted White	5/69	2/79	52	9y 11m		
4 William L. Hamling †	1/48	12/49	24	2y 0m	12 Elinor Mavor	5/79	9/82	17	3y 7m		
5 Howard Browne	1/50	8/56	64	6y 8m	13 George Scithers	11/82	7/86	23	3y 10m		
6 Paul W. Fairman	9/56	11/58	27	2y 3m	14 Patrick L. Price	9/86	3/91	28	4y 8m		
7 Cele Goldsmith	12/58	6/65	79	6y 7m	15 Kim Mohan *	5/91	7/92	15	1y 3m		
8 Joseph Wrizos	8/65	10/67	14	2y 5m	(* - ongoing)				572	66y 3m	

† - Hamling was listed as editor until 12/49, but during 1948 and 1949 while Palmer was establishing his new company, Hamling was editor in all but name. Although Hamling was listed as managing editor until 2/51, Browne had assumed the full editor role as of the 1/50 issue.

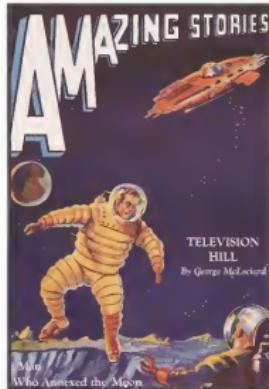
April 1926



Frank R. Paul

BY THE EARLY 1930s Gernsback had left, and the magazine went through a number of changes. Leo

February 1931



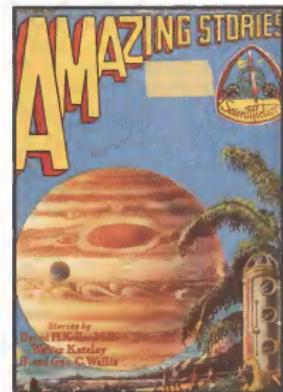
Leo Morey

A Gallery of Amazing Art

Covers Through the Years

IT ALL BEGAN in early 1926, when the cover at the left appeared on newsstands, heralding the birth of a new magazine devoted to what editor Hugo Gernsback called "scientifiction." The cover artist for that first issue, and most of the other early issues, was Frank R. Paul, who depicted a scene from the Jules Verne story, "Off on a Comet." Paul's cover for November 1928 (right) depicted Jupiter as seen from Ganymede, and was done to accompany a story entitled "The Moon Men."

November 1928



Frank R. Paul

Morey was the regular artist for several years, interrupted by a brief span in 1933 when some stylized

February 1933



A. Sigmund

covers were tried. The only aspect of those covers that survived was the new version of the magazine's title.

April 1935



Leo Morey

July 1935

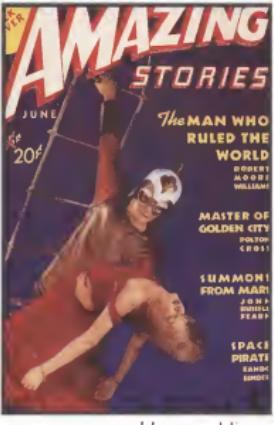


Leo Morey

THE ORIGINAL title presentation was resurrected briefly beginning in July 1935—with the extra innovation of an insect crawling across the initial "A." Big changes occurred in June 1938, Ray Palmer's first issue as editor, when a bold new title design appeared—and the cover art itself was a photograph!

The April 1940 cover doesn't have

June 1938



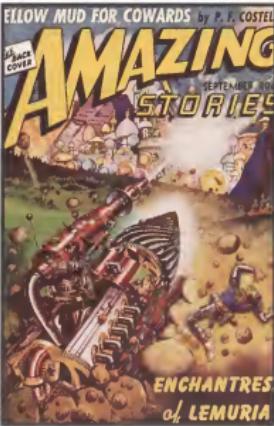
Horace Hime

May 1941



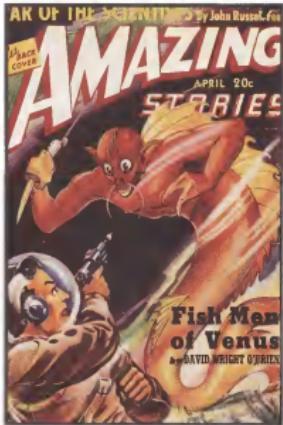
Frank R. Paul

September 1941



Robert Fuqua

April 1940

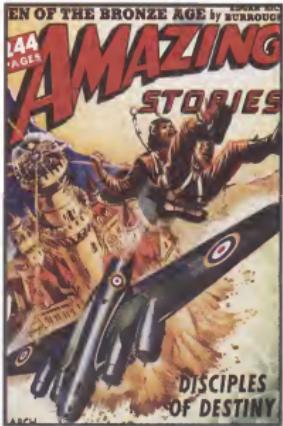


H. R. Hammond

planets," read the caption. "Will it someday be the deciding factor in a great war between worlds?"

Robert Fuqua (a pseudonym for illustrator Joe Tillotson) created several covers in the early 1940s. From 1942 into 1945 much of the magazine's content, and many of the cover illustrations, dealt with military and war-related themes.

March 1942



Robert Fuqua

March 1944

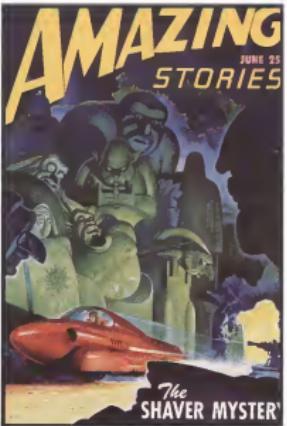


J. Allen St. John

SENSATIONAL COVERS help to sell magazines, and J. Allen St. John's March 1944 artwork for Robert Bloch's story "It's a Small World" is nothing if not eye-catching. A cleverly placed beaker in the bottom right prevents the art from being a little *too* sensational.

June 1947 was a special "Shaver

June 1947



Robert Gibson Jones

April-May 1953



Barye Phillips

November 1954



William Rembach

October 1950



Robert Gibson Jones

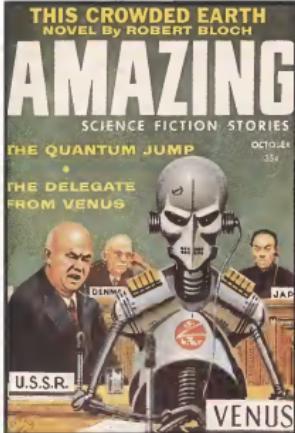
sized version made its debut with the April-May 1953 issue. Even in the smaller size, the magazine's covers retained their attention-getting ability. On occasion, as in these examples from 1954 and 1956, the cover stories—and their artwork—reflected the downbeat aspects of space exploration.

December 1956



Edward Valigursky

October 1958



Edward Valigursky

ARTISTIC LICENSE is often a major feature of science-fiction illustration, as evidenced by Valigursky's October 1958 cover that shows Nikita Khrushchev as the Soviet delegate to the United Nations.

Another new look made its debut during Cele Goldsmith's tenure as editor, when the magazine title was downsized and appeared in two dif-

August 1963



Lloyd Birmingham

July 1964



Ed Emshwiller

August 1965



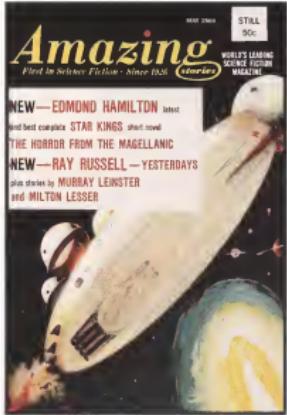
Alex Schomburg

ferent styles, as shown here on covers from the mid-1960s by three of the era's most prominent illustrators: Lloyd Birmingham, Ed Emshwiller ("Emsh"), and Alex Schomburg.

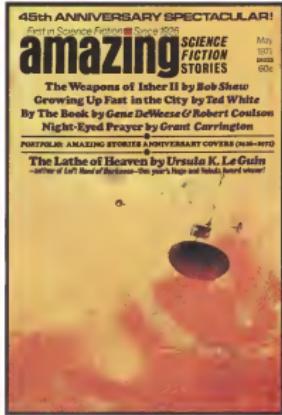
May 1969 was the first issue to come out under the editorship of Ted White. The cover art, not signed or credited, was a reprint of a scene that had been originally published

on a European magazine. It was nearly a year before White's publisher allowed him to commission art specifically done for the magazine. In late 1970 the title presentation was changed again, to a more modern typestyle. One of the most vivid covers of this period was done by Jeff Jones for the 45th anniversary issue in May 1971.

May 1969



May 1971



Jeff Jones

January 1978



Steve Fabian

ANOTHER NEW LOOK was used beginning in the mid-1970s, giving much more prominence to the words "science fiction." Steve Fabian created many of the covers during

May 1979



Scott Mavor

the last years of the Ted White era. When the magazine changed hands in May 1979, it also adopted a new appearance, but the title presentation has remained basically the same

May 1991



Tim Hildebrandt

November 1982



Michael Whelan

ever since then. The May 1979 cover is uncredited, but Scott Mavor is listed as "staff illustrator" inside that magazine.

The last change in ownership of the magazine came with the November 1982 issue, when TSR Hobbies, Inc., took over and George Scithers replaced Elinor Mavor as editor. The first TSR-produced cover was created by award-winning artist Michael Whelan.

December 1991



Nicholas Jainschigg

Looking Forward:

Forbidden Knowledge

by Stephen R. Donaldson

Coming in August 1992 from Bantam Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

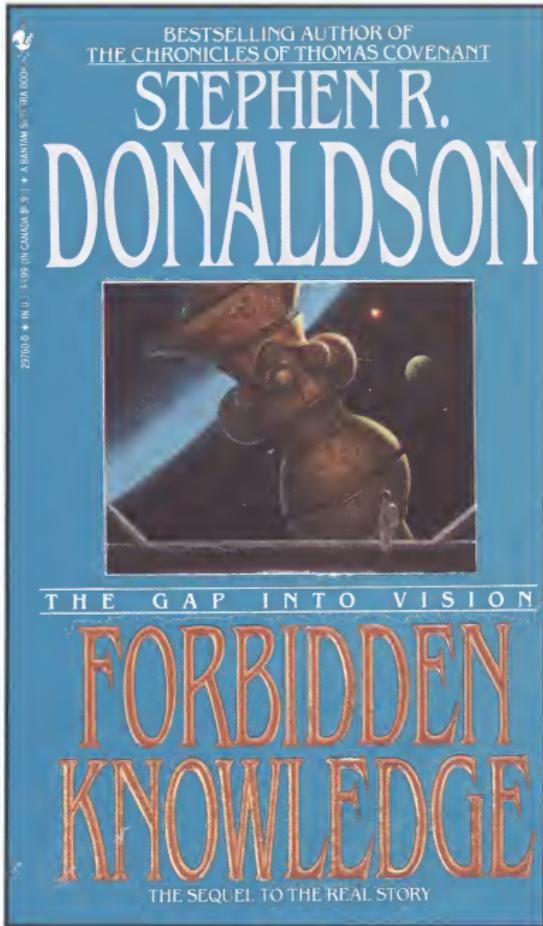
The ruthless and cunning Angus Thermopyle has been imprisoned for life. That might have been the end of the story . . .

. . . But instead it's only the beginning of a wonderfully textured novel of galaxy-spanning intrigue, romance, and deception. *The Gap into Vision: Forbidden Knowledge* is the second book in Stephen R. Donaldson's new series, building from the events in *The Gap into Conflict: The Real Story*.

The Amnion are aliens capable of warping the very form of humans, turning them into unrecognizable and often hideous slaves. These creatures want something from the human race, and finding out what this is might be the only way to save humankind. This effort is complicated by the revenge plotted by the still-powerful Angus, who controls his empire from his prison cell. The plot twists and weaves into a smoothly written science fiction thriller.

In this excerpt, Morn Hyland, the cop who captured Angus, has just barely escaped being killed by one of the arch-criminal's henchmen. Her rescuer, unfortunately, is another criminal.

Morn Hyland didn't open her mouth from the moment when Nick Succorso grabbed her arm and steered her through the chaos in Mallorys to the time when he and his people brought her to the docks where his frigate, *Captain's Fancy*, was berthed. His grip was hard, so hard it made her forearm numb and her fingers tingle, and the trip was a form of flight; frightened, almost desperate. She was running with all her courage away from Angus even though Nick never moved faster than a brisk walk. Nevertheless she clung to the zone implant control in her pocket, kept both fists buried in the pockets of her shipsuit to mask the fact that she was concealing something, and let Nick's grasp guide her.



Cover art by Steve Youll

The passages and corridors were strangely empty. Security had cleared them in case Angus's arrest turned into a fight. The boots of Nick's crew struck echoes off the decking; the knot of men and women protecting Morn from Station intervention moved as if they were followed by a suggestion of thunder, metallic and ominous; as if Angus and the crowd in Mallorys were after her. Her heart strained against her lungs, filling her with pressure. If anybody stopped her now, she would have no defense against a charge which carried the death penalty. But she fixed her gaze ahead of her, kept her mouth shut, clenched her fists in her pockets; let Nick's people sweep her along.

Then they reached the docks. Beyond the clutter of tracks and cables between the gantries lay Nick's ship. She missed her footing on a power line and couldn't use her hands to catch herself; but Nick hauled her up again, kept her going. Here the danger of being stopped was gravest. Station Security was everywhere, guarding the docks as well as the cargo inspectors, dock-engine drivers, stevedores, and crane operators. If Nick's deal with Security fell apart—

But nobody made any move to stop her, or the people protecting her. The station lock stood open; *Captain's Fancy* remained shut until one of Nick's men keyed it.

Nick took Morn inside, nearly drove her through the airlocks with the force of his grip.

After the expanse of the docks, she had the sensation that she was entering a small space—almost that she was being cornered. The frigate's lighting seemed dim and cloying compared to the arc lamps outside. She'd done everything she could think of to get away from Angus: she'd committed herself to this when she accepted the zone implant control. But now she caught her first glimpse of the place she was escaping to, the constricted passages of an unknown ship, and she nearly balked.

Captain's Fancy was a trap: she recognized that. For a moment the knowledge that she was going aboard another ship, *another ship*, where there was little hope and certainly no help, came close to seizing her muscles, paralyzing her like a spasm.

Then all Nick's people were aboard; and she had no time for paralysis. The airlock cycled closed. Nick Succorso took hold of her by the shoulders; he was about to put his arms around her. This was what he'd rescued her for—to possess her. The first crisis of her new life was upon her, when she was so full of alarm that she wanted to strike at him, drive his touch away.

Nevertheless she had the presence of mind to stop him by saying, "No heavy g."

Morally more than physically, Morn Hyland was exhausted to the core of her bones. Under the circumstances, perhaps the best that could be said about her was that she was half insane from rape and gap-sickness, from horror and panic and Angus's manipulation of her zone implant. During her weeks with him, she'd done and experienced things which would have sent her into caterwauling nightmares if she'd had the strength to dream. And then, despite everything, she'd saved his life. To all appearances, she'd been conquered by the

desperate vulnerability which made the victims of terrorists fall in love with them.

Appearances were deceptive, however. She hadn't fallen in love: she'd made a deal. The price was that she was *here*, aboard Nick's ship, at his mercy. The recompense was that she had the control to her zone implant in her pocket.

Saving Angus may have been the only cold-bloodedly crazy act of her relatively young life.

But if she'd lost her mind, she was still only half insane. No one who was totally mad could have come through that ordeal with the presence of mind to protest to Nick Succorso. "Please. No heavy g. Not without warning me."

She may have been cornered, but she wasn't beaten.

Her gambit succeeded. He stopped, stared at her oddly. She could see that he was suspicious. He wanted her. He also wanted to know what was going on. And he needed to get his ship away from Com-Mine.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "You sick or something?"

"I'm too weak. He—" She managed a shrug as eloquent as Angus's name. "I need time to recover."

Then she forced her mind blank, as she'd done so often with Angus, so that her visceral abhorrence of any male contact wouldn't make her do anything foolish—like kneeing Nick in the groin when he embraced her.

He was accustomed to women who dropped dead with pleasure when he took them. He wouldn't have been amused by the truth of how she felt about him.

He also wouldn't have been amused by the real reason she dreaded heavy g.

That was the key to her gap-sickness, the trigger which made her truly and helplessly insane. It had caused her to wreck *Starmaster*, to attempt a total self-destruct, even though *Starmaster*'s captain was her father and much of the crew was family; even though *Starmaster* was a UMCP destroyer which had just watched Angus Thermopyle slaughter an entire mining camp.

Gap-sickness was the sole justification of any kind for the zone implant Angus had placed in her brain—or for the zone implant control she now held. And that control was her only secret; her only defense when she went aboard *Captain's Fancy*. She would have tried to kill anyone who took it away from her.

To deflect his suspicions, she was prepared to tell Nick as much about *Starmaster* as he wished, even though the ship was entirely classified and Mom herself was a cop. As a last resort, she would tell him how *Starmaster* died. But she would never tell him that Angus had given her a zone implant—and then let her have the control.

Never.

She was a cop: that was the problem. She was a cop—and "unauthorized use" of a zone implant was the single worst crime she could commit, short of treason. The fact that she was helping Angus Thermopyle by hiding the control to her own zone implant only made matters worse. She'd dedicated her life to fighting men like him and Nick Succorso, to fighting evils like piracy and the unauthorized use of zone implants.

But she knew what the control could do for her. Angus

had taught her that, inadvertently but well. It had become more important than her oath as a UMC cop, more precious than her honor. She would never give it up.

Rather than betray the truth about herself, she did her best to go blank so that she wouldn't react as if Nick were Angus when he kissed her.

Fortunately her ploy worked. He had more immediate exigencies to consider. And, after all, the idea that Angus had left her sick and damaged was plausible. Nick released her suddenly and wheeled away.

Over his shoulder, he told his second, "Assign her a cabin. Get her food. Cat if she wants it. God knows what that bastard did to her."

As Nick strode away, Morn heard him say, "We're leaving. Now." He had hunger in his voice and a livid flush in the scars under his eyes. "Security doesn't want us to hang around. That's part of the deal."

Morn knew what his hunger meant. But now she would have a little time to get ready for it.

Inside her shipsuit she was sweating so fearfully that she reeked of it.

Nick's second, a woman named Mikka Vasaczek, was in a hurry. Maybe she was eager to get to the bridge herself. Or maybe she knew she was being supplanted and didn't like it. Whatever the reason, she was brusque and quick.

That suited Morn.

Riding the soft pressure of hydraulics, they took the lift down—"down" would become "up" as soon as *Captain's Fancy* undocked and engaged her own internal-g spin—to the cabin deck which wrapped around the ship's holds, engines, data banks, and scan- and armament-drivers. *Captain's Fancy* was luxurious by any standards, and she had more than one cabin for passengers. Mikka Vasaczek guided Morn to the nearest of these, ushered her inside, showed her how to code the lock and key the intercom. Then the second demanded, not quite politely, "You want anything?"

Morn wanted so many things that her desire left her weak. With an effort, she replied, "I'm all right. I just need sleep. And safety."

Mikka had assertive hips; she moved like she knew how to use them in a variety of ways. The way she cocked them now suggested a threat.

"Don't count on it." She grunted sardonically. "None of us is safe while you're aboard."

"You'd better be careful. Nick has better sense than you think."

Without waiting for a reply, she left. The door swept shut behind her automatically.

Morn felt like weeping. She felt like curling herself into a ball and cowering in the corner. But she had no time for tears and cowardice. Her bare survival was in doubt. If she couldn't find a way to defend herself now, she would never get another chance.

First she tapped a code into the keypad of the lock, not because that would keep people out—the ship's computer could override her instructions whenever Nick wished—but because it would slow them down; it would warn her when somebody was about to enter.

Then she took out the control to her zone implant.

That small black box was her doom. It showed how much Angus had cost her, how deep the damage he'd done her ran. Her ruin was so profound that she was willing to turn her back on her father and the UMCP and every ideal she'd held worthy—and turn her back, too, on rescue by Com-Mine Security, which would have led to every form of help and comfort the UMCP had at its command, as well as to Angus's execution—for the sake of control over her own zone implant.

But she also knew the control was her last hope. That was true no matter where she went: it was only more obvious aboard *Captain's Fancy*, not more true. With the zone implant, Angus Thermopyle had made her less than she could bear to be. He'd taught her that her physical and moral being were despicable; mere things to be used or abused with impunity, and then discarded if they failed to satisfy him; ill-made objects with no claim on respect. By the same logic, however, the zone implant was the only means by which she could become more than she was. It was her only way past her smallness, past the contemptibility of her own resources. It was power—and she'd been powerless too long. Without it she would never recover from the harm she'd suffered. Nothing else could counteract the lessons Angus had taught her.

Therefore she was dependent on it—and therefore she had to avoid any kind of external help. Com-Mine Station and the UMCP would have done everything they could think of for her; but they would have taken the control away. In effect they would have abandoned her to her unworth.

Once she'd said to Angus, *Give me the control. I need it to beal*. But he'd refused her then, and now her needs were altogether more absolute.

At the moment, however, they were simply more immediate.

If Nick knew—or guessed—that she had a zone implant, how long would she be able to keep the control itself secret? More than anything, she needed energy. Energy to force down her fear; energy to face him. Energy to distract him.

The zone implant could give her that. It could suppress her brain's necessary ability to acknowledge fatigue. Unfortunately she only knew what the implant could do: she didn't know how to use it. Of course, she could read the labels imprinted above the buttons; but she didn't know how to tune them, how to combine them to produce specialized effects. She could only make her implant function at its crudest.

That had to change. She would be fatally vulnerable until she gained complete mastery over the control, over herself; until she could play her own nerves and synapses the way Angus Thermopyle had played them.

To learn that kind of mastery she needed time. A lot of time.

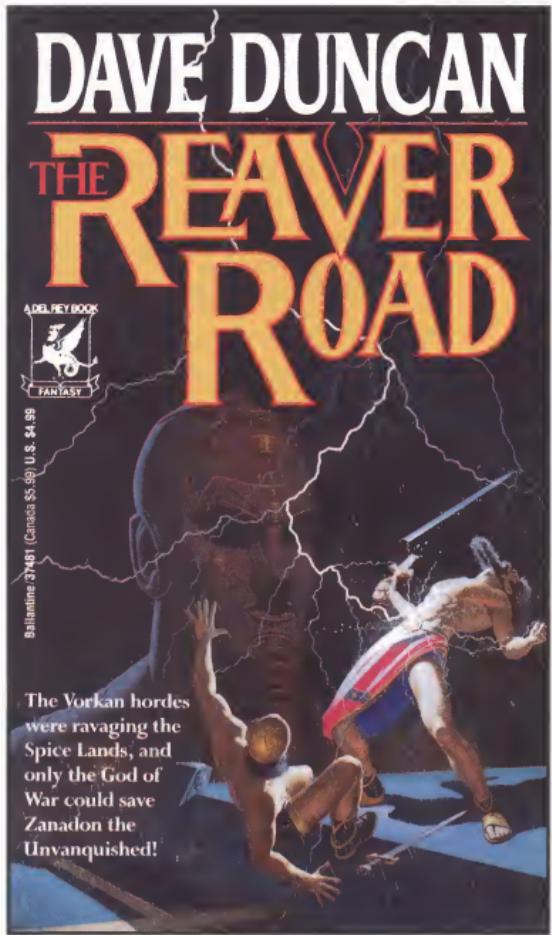
Right now, the best she could hope for was a few hours. ♦

Looking Forward:

The Reaver Road

by Dave Duncan

Coming in August 1992 from Del Rey Books



Cover art by Rómás

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

This well-crafted high fantasy is a story viewed through the eyes of Omar, a Teller of Tales and, some claim, the finest storyteller alive. Part of the reason that Omar's tales are so captivating may be that he is often a participant in the adventures he talks about.

In this sample from early in the novel, Omar has encountered a patrol of guards from the city of Unvanquished Zanadon and has been "recruited" into a work force that will assist in rebuilding the city's walls.

I have been part of a slave gang often enough. Having just been washed in the river, this one was considerably more pleasant than most in my experience, and I marched willingly over to the end of the line, cooperating as the bronze collar was locked around my neck. I noted a few surprising points, though.

The pickings had been poor. There were thirteen men in the coffle, and only one of them looked capable of surviving very long in the stone quarry that was our most probable destination. That one was as stalwart as the hulking Corporal Fotius, more imposing, even, as more of him was visible. A ragged, poorly healing scar angled down from his collarbone to his hip, and an arrow wound in his calf made him limp. Furthermore, his back bore an assortment of red and purple welts.

This titan had been placed at the rear of the line, and burdened with the unused length of chain. When I was locked in behind him, he shot a furious glare at me under brows as imposing as battlements, baring teeth in his sudden jungle of beard. His black hair hung in wet tangles to his shoulders.

Correct procedure would have been to put this most dangerous specimen near the middle, and to load the leftover chain on a pony, so

that the gang would be tethered at both ends. Captain Publian Fotius was being curiously inefficient.

However—as I once remarked to Vlad the Opprobrious, or possibly his grandfather—the only thing that ever surprises me is the expected. I did not, therefore, seek to advise the captain on the finer points of his trade, and I shouldered the weighty, corroded burden without complaint, although I could see from abrasions on my predecessor's shoulders that it was going to be onerous. When the escort mounted up and the coffle lurched off along the towpath, I redistributed the load so that a few stray loops hung down my back, for the two young lads equipped with whips looked unpleasantly enthusiastic.

Of late my feet had grown accustomed to sandals, and the chain grew excruciatingly hot in the fierce sun, but I ambled along cheerfully at the requisite pace, whistling softly through my teeth. My main concern was that Unvanquished Zanadon might feed its slaves in the mornings and not the evenings. Had I been a praying man, I might have mentioned that worry to the gods. The most interesting activity in my field of view was the tortuous paths the sweat beads found down the battered back of the hairy giant in front of me.

The chain clinked, the ponies' hooves thumped, and my belly rumbled. As we departed the Reaver Road, though, we began to see more settled country, secured by the might of the city—we passed several troops of armored men. The fields here had not yet been looted, nor the hamlets burned. Peasants bent to their toil without looking up as we trudged by.

Captain Fotius had stated literal truth when he said that an hour's walk would bring us within sight of Zanadon. Truly its granite walls and beetling towers are an inspiring sight, and I was stirred by seeing at last what I had viewed so often in my dreams. Regrettably, the great city stands at the top of a solitary and imposing mesa. It is visible a long way out across the plain.

Soon we began to see traders and mounted caravans and women carrying bundles on their heads. Among these, inhabitants of the city itself could be recognized by their grander attire.

The climate of the Spice Lands is benign, and only in the hills is clothing ever needed for warmth. Even the winter rains are usually warm enough to ignore. In the villages men tie a cloth around their loins and leave it at that. In the cities that most basic of garments has been expanded into an ornate swath, whose detail comes close to being a cult, rigidly regulated. The lawmakers fuss endlessly over the colors, the patterns, the fineness of the cloth, and the number of times it has been wound around. The height of the lower hem is even more critical. Slaves and the very lowly must leave both knees in view, but increasing status is indicated by covering first one knee, then two, and so on, until the wealthy and important drape both legs to the ankle.

To the initiated, a swath reveals the wearer's rank or trade, his fortune and family and patron god, and how many children he has sired—they work those lioncloths harder than the king of Klulith's ox! Moreover, the swath must be held by a single pin, located just below the

navel—this is obligatory. The ornamentation permitted on this pin is a study in itself.

The cities' sumptuary laws usually allow cloaks to some groups—the rich, the royal, and the religious—but most men rarely wear anything above the waist except pot-shaped hats and square black beards. In some cities a man may not marry until his beard reaches down to his nipples, which is why in Urgalon pretty girls are known as "neck-benders."

Women seem to wear anything they please.

As evening fell, we drew near to the base of the ramp, and the soldiers halted to rest their mounts and eat a brief snack. They allowed us to lie down in a cool, ready ditch, after the ponies had been watered. Strict penalties were announced for anyone who spoke, and one of the whip-bearers patrolled up and down the line to compel obedience.

I arranged my face close to the back of my neighbor's head, and waited until the guard was at the far end of the line.

"Omar," I said without moving my lips.

"Thorian," came the whisper.

I remarked that we were going to be worked to death or slain when the siege began, to conserve food.

The nod was barely perceptible, but quick. I was encouraged to surmise that this Thorian had more than bone inside his thatch, not counting the lice. I closed my eyes until the guard had come and gone, and then asked if he could break the chain without my help.

He shrugged. He must think he had a chance, though, or he would not have been so annoyed at losing the hindmost place.

"If you need me, stoop," I said, "so I can reach over you."

Another nod.

"I'll tell you when the time is right. And let me lead when we run, for I can take us to safe haven."

Cracks and screams from farther up the line ended our attempts at conversation.

* * *

As we began to ascend the ramp, the soldiers dismounted and proceeded on foot, leading their ponies. The incline is so long and the ascent so high that the army has standing orders for all returning patrols to proceed on foot, lest they overstrain tired mounts. Most officers have more sense than to antagonize their men for the sake of a regulation, but Captain Publian Fotius was an exception.

The burly Gramian Fotius appeared near the rear of the line, and he was not in a jovial mood. A vexed expression marred the customary tranquility of his countenance. He was leading his pony with one hand, and in the other he bore a whip of plaited oxhide.

He paced along for a while beside Thorian, eyeing him as a strong man may seek to take the measure of another, for they were of comparable stature. The slave, despite the other's social and strategic advantage, matched him scowl for scowl.

The soldier opened the conversation.

"Want some more *pain*, Slave?" he inquired jocularly.
"No."

"Didn't hear that. Speak up."

"Please don't flog me any more," Thorian growled.

Fotius grunted in disappointment and thought for a while.

"You got a wound," he remarked at last, pointing at the half-healed scar that transected the other's torso.
"Where did you get that wound, Slave?"

"Fighting Vorkan scum."

Fotius then pointed out that in the future, Slave Thorian would be required to fight nothing more than blocks of stone, and that those were undoubtedly more suited to his abilities and prowess.

The other indicated that he was entirely satisfied to leave the Vorkan problem in the hands of the capable Corporal Fotius, and had every confidence that the blood-drenched reavers of Dom Wilth, razors of Forbin and rapists of Polrain, would suspend their advance, cease their ravaging, and flee in terror immediately upon learning the identity of their new opponent. In cultured and measured discourse, Thorian further implied that, wound or no wound, he would be happy to take on the corporal at any contest or form of competition known to man or god, and would thereupon employ his person to clean dog droppings from the gutter. And furthermore, he was at a loss to know why the corporal was perspiring so copiously at the moment, on this trifling hill.

I concluded that he was a man of spirit.

Fotius might reasonably have pointed out the unfairness of Thorian's final observation, in that he was struggling with a skittish pony in a crowd and was personally encased in almost half his own weight of bronze-upholstered bullhide, while the slave wore only a metal collar and a small rag. He did not do so, but who among us has not at some time overlooked a possible witty rejoinder and only thought of it much later?

The earlier challenge having escaped his notice altogether, due to the careful phrasing employed, the corporal decided to drop back and taunt me instead. I could sympathize with his frustration—there could be little satisfaction in flogging a chained captive, and in any case the press of the crowd would inhibit the limber arm motion needed for satisfactory results.

In most realms I have known, it is decreed that travelers when passing must veer to one side of the way, the choice being specified. On the great ramp of Unvanquished Zanadon, the law explicitly requires those approaching to walk in the middle and those descending to stay on the outside. I do not know the reason for this, but I do know that the result is to add greatly to the confusion of traffic when the ramp is, as it then was, crowded to overflowing. The parapets are low, and in places the drop from the sides is considerable.

Gramian Fotius eyed me with a puzzled expression. I was the madman who had walked up to his Uncle Publian and just asked to be made a slave. I had not been ridden down and clubbed like the others. He could tell I was crazy just from my smile.

"Teller of tales, huh?" he said.

"Trader of tales. I tell you one, you tell me one. Fair trade."

Bronze jangled as the corporal shrugged. "You start."

A descending camel train caused a momentary delay. Fotius's pony reacted in the way ponies always do to camels. The corporal eventually settled the matter by striking the beast with his fist, half stunning it. Then he was ready to listen, and I could begin.

"Ever since I came to the Spice Lands—"

"You weren't born here?"

"No," I said. "I was born on the Isle of Evermist, in the far north. My father was a carver of ivory and my mother a professional wrestler. You want to hear a tale of Evermist or the Spice Lands?"

"Spice Lands, of course."

It did not matter to me. "Well, then. Often since I came to the Spice Lands, I have been told tales of the mischievous god Nusk."

"Never heard of him."

"He is the god of doorways and beginnings."

"Oh, Nask, you mean."

"Perchance he is known here as Nask. He is said also to be the god of adolescence, frequently associated with virgins. Many tales depict him in that wise, as a comely youth of spirit. It is told among the Waimanians, for example, how Sky, the Father of Gods, discovered Nusk among the rushes of the Nathipi River, philandering with a group of mortal maidens. Being most exceedingly wroth at his wilful son's behavior, Sky ordered him to complete a great work for each of the maidens he had thus dishonored so that mortals would evermore be reminded of his shame."

"What was he doing with the maidens?"

I sighed. "The details were not specified, but I fancy much what you yourself do, Corporal, when a group of the lovely creatures besets you in a secluded place. The works that Nusk was thus constrained to attempt were to be monuments so mighty that no mortal could have achieved them."

"How many maidens?" he demanded, showing genuine interest.

"Your perception has penetrated to the nub of the heart of the center of the mystery! By establishing how many works the god completed, we may know how many maidens he had used so shamefully. The estimates vary, depending on the teller of the tale. In all regions west of the Nathipi, though, it is agreed that this great granite ramp of Zanadon, rising so straight and direct from the plain to the giddy height we have now achieved, level with the clifftop, must be considered first among all the wonders of the god. You will not argue with that?"

Gramian Fotius considered the question, crunching up his forehead under the brow of his helmet. Before he could reply, the parade stumbled to a halt, jammed in the press before the gates of the city. Grunting angrily, he went shouldering forward to see what the delay was, dragging his pony behind him.

Thus I never did hear his conclusions. ♦

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The (Re)Wetting of Venus

Stephen L. Gillett

In my column "The Air We're Standing On" (March 1992), I described how Venus probably got to its present hellish state: the "runaway greenhouse." When its oceans boiled, all its carbon dioxide stayed in the atmosphere instead of precipitating out into limestone as happened on Earth. Then, all the water in the atmosphere got clobbered by solar ultraviolet radiation, and the hydrogen escaped to space.

So much for Perelandra! Earth's "twin" isn't very twinlike. Of course, the old "wet Venus" of SF was largely wishful thinking in any event. Back in 1940 Rupert Wildt proposed a "dry, hot Venus" model in which the temperatures were maintained by a huge greenhouse effect. No one wanted to believe it, though.

Anyway, is there any way to reverse the runaway greenhouse, to re-wet Venus? Carl Sagan proposed, somewhat tongue in cheek, a possible way almost thirty years ago: seed Venus's atmosphere with cyanobacteria ("blue-green algae"). They break down the CO₂ by photosynthesis, incorporate the carbon into their structure, and release oxygen. Photosynthesis also requires water, of course, but there's still a bit left in the Venusian clouds. (It is bound up into sulfuric acid droplets, but that's a detail!)

Sooner or later, with the vagaries of the air currents, a bacterium is carried down into the furnace below, where it is charred to carbon and water. Overall, therefore, photosyn-

thesis splits the CO₂ into C and O₂, with the water continually regenerated. (At the cost of a lot of fried cyanobacteria, of course.)

Presto! A new cliche was born. This scenario was almost immediately taken over by naive SF writers. In fact, you get the impression sometimes that all you need to terraform Venus is a couple rockets full of algae and a land office.

Alas, it won't work. Terraforming Venus is *hard*. There's too much air, by far. There's also not enough water, and the planet is too hot. And all this, as the KGB used to say, is not accidental. The problems are tied together via the massive greenhouse effect.

Let's look at the too-much-air problem first. Venus's atmosphere contains over 90 Earth atmospheres of CO₂. That's almost 100 *kilograms* of atmospheric CO₂ for every square centimeter of the planet's surface.

That's a *lot*.

A BOTE (Back of the Envelope) calculation: If you split all that air into carbon and oxygen, you end up with over 100 meters of carbon-
soot—on the surface, overlaid by some 65 atmospheres' worth of oxygen. Of course, things would never get to this point; the carbon and oxygen would burn back to CO₂ long before. Even on Earth, with a modest 0.2 atmosphere of oxygen diluted with four times that much nitrogen, a coal bed only a meter or so thick will burn out when it becomes exposed at the surface. The

Clinker Beds of the Powder River Basin in Wyoming, for example, are miles of cooked rock baked by burning coal beds.

If you *did* seed Venus's atmosphere with algae, *à la* the Sagan scenario, all you'd do is set up a steady state. Once you built up a little oxygen, the black carbon on the surface would burn again, and you'd never go any farther. You'd be making CO₂ again as fast as the cyanobacteria removed it.

In "The Air We're Standing On," I mentioned that Earth has as much CO₂ as Venus does. Ours is all safely locked away in limestone, though. So here's another comparison: Venus's CO₂ corresponds to a layer of limestone almost a kilometer thick over the entire planet.

Limestone, of course, in addition contains calcium (or magnesium) oxide. So a limestone layer a kilometer thick requires a lot of calcium and magnesium oxide, too. If you got those oxides out of the Venus crust, it would take *all* the calcium and magnesium in about the upper two kilometers. On Earth, this sort of reaction has occurred because plate tectonics continually churns the crust. On Venus, though, we don't have the mechanism—much less all of geologic time for the mechanism to work.

Next is Venus's lack of water. What's left would yield a layer only around 4 to 40 centimeters deep over the entire planet. That ain't enough, not by a long shot. For one

thing, it would sink out of sight into the Venus regolith (the layer of broken and pulverized rock resulting from meteorite impact, chemical and mechanical weathering, and so on, commonly but incorrectly called "soil").

Further, under Earthlike conditions a lot of water—more than 4 centimeters, anyway!—would be lost by reaction to make hydrated minerals (minerals, such as clays, that contain water in their structure). Finally, you can't have liquid water on the surface without also having some water vapor in the atmosphere. Earth's atmosphere, the sort of thin, O₂-rich atmosphere we'd like to have, itself contains around 10 centimeters of water—or about as much as is already in the Venusian atmosphere.

And again, Venus's water isn't even present as *water*; it's tied up in sulfuric acid droplets.

But the lack of water's almost a side issue, as we'll see.

Last, of course, Venus is way too hot. And with an inconvenient twist to boot: although Venus receives about twice the sunlight Earth does, on the average *less* sunlight reaches the Venusian surface than reaches the Earth's surface! Venus's continuous cloud cover reflects light more efficiently than Earth does, something like 70% of all sunlight striking the planet. So you have a "Catch-22": The clouds contribute significantly to the greenhouse effect, and thus help keep the surface hot. But on the other hand, they reflect much sunlight that would otherwise also heat the surface.

At least cooling off the place won't take too long. Here's another BOTE number: Assume you shut off *all* the sunlight (say with a giant sunshade). Assume further that only the atmosphere and outermost crust of Venus have to cool. This isn't a bad assumption, because rocks are great thermal insulators; the interior can stay very hot even with the surface cool. Under these conditions cooling takes about half a century.

Well. First things first. Obviously, the main problem is removing the air. Once that's done, the surface will cool all by itself—at least if we're

willing to wait a while—and then we can also bring in a little water, say from a comet or outer planet satellite. (We'll assume the slow rotation rate is livable—think of it as a season instead. After all, polar regions on Earth put up with months of sunlight followed by months of darkness.)

Of course, this won't be easy. To remove all Venus's atmosphere in, say, 100 years requires moving about 150 million tons every second. Lifting all that mass out of Venus's gravitational well also takes a lot of energy, some 2.5×10^{28} joules, or (in terms of nuclear-bomb energy) about 6×10^{12} megatons.

What about just blowing off the atmosphere? Sometimes there's no point in being subtle! If you try thermonuclear bombs, though, even big thermonuclear bombs, the problem is coupling the energy to the atmosphere. It's just not very efficient. Most of the energy is wasted in heating gas that they can't escape.

Maybe *lots* of bombs is the key: float them high in the atmosphere, with balloons or something, so there's an easy shot to outer space, and make sure they're all over the planet. Then trigger them all at once, so you get a planetary-scale shock wave blowing out into space, like a huge shaped charge. Repeat as necessary. . . . (I *said* it wasn't subtle!)

Using a giant impact has a similar problem. Many planetary scientists now think giant impacts during Solar System formation blew away lots of the atmospheres of the growing terrestrial planets. But you need a *really* big object to remove anything substantial once something's become the size of Venus. And moving something *that* big will be a problem! Not to mention you might have other uses for it; a chunk of material a thousand kilometers or so across is probably more valuable as a resource in its own right. (There are serious military implications, too, if you start careening thousand-kilometer chunks of mass around the System.)

Perhaps instead we could boil the atmosphere away, heating and photodissociating the carbon dioxide by

concentrating sunlight with (say) vast solar mirrors. Surely we could force heavier gases to escape with concentrated sunlight, the way hydrogen was lost to begin with?

The problem here is that thermal escape isn't very efficient for heavy atoms. For carbon dioxide molecules to escape efficiently enough, the temperature must be thousands of degrees Kelvin. Even oxygen atoms (which the CO₂ will partly dissociate into) need similar temperatures. After all, we can't wait for geologic time.

Heating the carbon dioxide also requires not only an intensive energy source, but highly efficient absorption of the energy. If most of the sunlight just passes through the gas to heat stuff below, it doesn't do much good. The absorption must occur at the edge of the atmosphere, so that fast-moving molecules have room to escape. Again, molecules deep in the atmosphere can't escape because so many other molecules are in the way.

A somewhat more subtle approach might be with lasers: gigantic lasers, tuned to the absorption band of CO₂. Maybe that way we could heat CO₂ molecules, and nothing else—and heat them at the outer edge of the atmosphere, too, where there's nothing in the way.

Blasting off 150 million tons of CO₂ every second, though, requires a *big* laser. Or lots of them.

All in all, removing the atmosphere bodily won't be easy, at least till someone invents antigravity. So let's look at a whole different approach. Let's think about soaking up all that excess atmosphere instead. Of course, we immediately hit the size-of-planet problem again, because we need a lot of stuff to do the soaking up.

For example, suppose we try locking up the CO₂ into crustal carbonates. The rock currently at the surface isn't going to be much help. I pointed out above that you'd need complete reaction of the outermost two kilometers or so of Venus's crust to soak up all the CO₂ as carbonates. And it would be hard to stir it up enough, much less to make it react. After all, the calcium and mag-

nesium are already combined in silicates to be broken up first.

Another little Catch-22, too: the present surface temperatures on Venus are too high for carbonates to be stable (or, at the least, the carbonate must be in chemical equilibrium with some silicate). We have to lower the temperature to remove CO_2 as carbonate; but we can't lower the temperature until the CO_2 is removed.

Another possibility is to react the atmosphere with a metallic element to form a solid oxide, which will then plummet to the surface. Calcium or magnesium would be the best metals. These metals are highly active—active enough to rip the oxygen out of CO_2 . (Magnesium will even burn in CO_2 . You can stick a burning magnesium ribbon into a jar of CO_2 and watch the black carbon smoke boil off.)

It's even better than that. Once formed, these oxides pull out even more CO_2 , because they react with it to yield carbonates directly:



So you get extra bang for your terraforming buck.

Of course there's a catch. Although they're reasonably abundant elements, both calcium and magnesium don't occur uncombined in the Solar System. They *are* chemically active, after all. Both are always found tightly bound into silicate minerals.

Elsewhere, I've suggested bringing calcium and/or magnesium metal from Mercury. Why Mercury? If its crust is like the Moon's, which seems plausible, it has lots of calcium and magnesium silicates. And it has lots of solar power, which will be needed to break all that metal out of all those rocks, and send it off to Venus to boot.

Of course, you need an awesome amount of metal—something about the size of Ceres made of pure calcium or magnesium. And you have to chew up a lot of Mercury getting it. The only way you could ever consider this scenario is by massive au-

tomatic processing, probably by "von Neumann machines," self-replicating robots that would reproduce, grow, differentiate, and chug away all by themselves. (See my JBIS paper, mentioned in "References" at the end of this column, for details.)

I once suggested iron metal as a "quick and dirty" scavenger, because although it won't react with CO_2 directly, native (metallic) iron is abundant in the Solar System. Alas, it's not abundant enough; Martyn Fogg has pointed out there aren't enough iron meteorites to rust out Venus's air! He also noted that the metal will be lots more valuable for other things. This just shows, for all you would-be terraformers out there, that you need to *do the numbers!* Lots of clever terraforming scenarios, like the Sagan scenario itself, crash when confronted with the sheer size of a planet.

You can see that nothing is easy. We've come quite a ways from a rocketful of algae! However we terraform Venus, it will take far-future technologies to accomplish.

It'll take a long time, too. People who talk blithely of Venus terraforming happening in a few years or decades—or even centuries—haven't done the numbers (barring unexpected technologies such as anti-gravity). You're dealing with *lots* of material.

And even when Venus is finally terraformed, we have to worry that it'll stay terraformed. Obviously, we eventually have to bring in *some* water—and once we do that, the greenhouse just might run away again! Which would be a pain, to say the least.

So, what can we do?

Remember that water vapor sets off the greenhouse runaway, because it's a great greenhouse gas. So we have to keep down the water vapor. How?

One approach is *not* to have a whole Earth-ocean-full of water on Venus. Once the CO_2 blanket is thinned down, the surface temperatures won't be uniform: the equator will be warmer than the poles, and the highlands will be cooler than the lowlands. If we bring in only a modest amount of water, maybe the wa-

ter would evaporate in the hot regions but precipitate again in the cooler areas. The greenhouse couldn't run away because there isn't enough water.

Second, we want very salty oceans. Water vapor evaporates less readily from brine than from pure water. In fact, the vapor pressure of water over a highly concentrated brine such as the Great Salt Lake or the Dead Sea is only a little more than 50% of the pressure over pure water. (You can think of the salts in the brine as glomming onto the water molecules so that they escape into vapor less easily.) This could be a big help, because a salty body of water on Venus just wouldn't put as much vapor into the air as would a body of water at the same temperature on Earth. (Earth's oceans are nearly "fresh water" by the standards of these brines!)

Salty oceans may also happen automatically. Venus has probably about the same amount of chlorine as Earth. After all, it seems to have roughly the same amount of CO_2 and possibly nitrogen. It probably even had a lot of hydrogen once. Also, a small amount of HCl occurs in the Venusian atmosphere. This suggests there are lots of chloride salts on or near the Venusian surface just waiting to be dissolved.

Sulfate ion (SO_4^{2-}) is the next most common anion (negatively charged ion) in Earthly seawater, after chloride. It's also abundant in saline lakes such as the Great Salt Lake. And it's probably common on Venus too; as I've mentioned, the droplets that make up the clouds are mostly sulfuric acid.

Finally, carbonate (CO_3^{2-}) and bicarbonate (HCO_3^-) ions are important in some saline lakes on Earth, and they could be important on Venus from dissolving residual CO_2 .

(Why am I just talking about the anions? Because it's the anions that determine how many water-soluble salts are available. For example, we all know sea salt is mostly sodium chloride, ordinary table salt. However, although most of Earth's chlorine is in seawater, or was once in seawater, only a small percentage of Earth's sodium is in seawater. Lots

more is combined into crustal rocks, and those rocks don't dissolve.)

So, water-soluble salts are probably not only present but abundant. At least, then, we don't have to import salts to Venus. It's nice *something* turns out to be a bit easier!

Still, even salty oceans and little water may not be enough to stabilize the Venus climate against greenhouse runaway. There's an *awful* lot of sunlight there.

We may need to do things like setting up giant, permanent sunshades. But that pretty much negates the value of terraforming, because then the terraformed planet would need ongoing maintenance just like a giant space colony. In fact, terraforming seems pointless if the resulting planetary environment is not stable for a *long* time—at least millions of years, not merely for a few thousand years. Otherwise you just have a very expensive space colony. (That's true of lots of "terraforming" scenarios, in fact.)

So why terraform at all? I'll get into that in a future column.

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I discuss the problems—and my proposed solution—in much more detail here.

Wildt, R., Notes on the surface temperature of Venus, *Astrophysical Journal*, 91, 266-268, 1940.

Proof that a Venus cooked by a huge CO₂ greenhouse effect is *not* a new idea! ♦

About the Authors

We knew **Phil Jennings** was prolific—pick up any issue of this magazine for the last four years and the chance is better than one in three there will be a Jennings story inside—and we knew Phil had a wide-ranging imagination, so he seemed like the perfect candidate to undertake an unusual writing job.

It all started when Ron Walotsky showed us a painting that he hoped we'd consider for a cover. It didn't take long to decide that it was just a little too busy to use on the front of the magazine. But we didn't want to let it get away, and it seemed like an opportunity to do something different: ask a writer to do a story based on a piece of art, instead of working the process the other way around.

That's where Phil came in. Would he like to have the inspiration for his next story come from a painting? Sure he would. We sent him a photo of the artwork, and in return he sent us "The Vortex"—a biting piece of modern-day fantasy that leads off this month's fiction section.

Speaking of wide-ranging imaginations, another writer who belongs on the short list for that category is **Paul Di Filippo**. "Lennon Spex," his third appearance in the last year, is about as far away in tone and concept from "Victoria" (June 1991) and "The Mill" (November 1991) as a story can be. Give *this* piece a chance, and you won't be sorry.

Fairly recent history has taught us that some people will resort to practically anything to be elected President. **John Morressy** examines the futuristic implications of that assertion in "In and Out With Me"—another one of his tales about the Joe Kilborn Detective Agency, which is owned and operated by a clone. (An earlier story in the series, "Except My Life, Except My Life, Except My Life," appeared in our July 1991 issue.) "I'm a very private person," John says. "A gathering of more than four people makes me feel that I'm in a crowd." This, from a person who writes stories in which the

main character is four people. Go figure. . . .

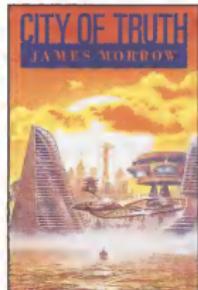
Ian McDowell credits M. R. James and Ramsey Campbell for serving as the influences that led him to write "My Father's Face." Yes, it's a horror story, and according to Ian that's the only categorization that really matters. "Horror isn't dead," he says, "and artificial distinctions between its 'quiet' and 'noisy' varieties, between subtlety and splat, Dark Fantasy and Dark Mystery, bore me silly." The story in question has a lot of quiet, a dash of splat, and is just plain dripping with Dark. You *won't* be bored.

Music and drugs have a connection that goes way back. In "A Little Night Music," **Bridget McKenna** takes that connection and tightens it down until the words come to mean basically the same thing. The story is her third appearance in this magazine, following "The Defiling" (January 1991) and "The Bard Effect" (November 1991).

In every issue we try to work in at least one story from a writer who's never been in the magazine before. This time that distinction belongs to **J. H. Ulowetz**. "Journey" is his second professional publication. Joe has a background in astronomy and works as a software engineer . . . and he's written a story that has nothing to do with computers or astronomy, but is one of the best uses of second-person narrative voice we've seen in a long time. (If you don't know what second-person narrative voice is, the sentence you're reading is an example of it.)

Rounding out our fiction presentation this time is the second installment of our four-part serialization of "The Ship Who Searched" by **Anne McCaffrey** and **Mercedes Lackey**. The novel will be out in August from Baen Books—and maybe in the August magazine we'll have enough space to talk About the Authors. All things come to those who wait. . . .

Book Reviews



CITY OF TRUTH

by James Morrow
St. Martin's Press
104 pages, \$14.95 (hardcover)

City of Truth is an honest book. It depicts Veritas, a city whose inhabitants are conditioned so they cannot lie. The act of lying is not only abhorrent to the citizens in Veritas, it's physically painful. As a result you get a slightly skewed reality, where people read best-sellers like *You Can Have Somewhat Better Sex and How To Find A Certain Amount of Inner Peace . . .* titles which by their qualifiers are rendered true.

Our protagonist is Jack Sperry, who works as an art critic. Being an art critic is a high-prestige job in Veritas, and the critics mainly practice deconstructionism—the destruction of historical artifacts found to contain lies. (To Jack's trained eye, almost everything from the old days contains lies: films, books, magazines, idealized sculptures. He wants real life, warts and all. In short, the *real truth*.)

Until his son contracts a fatal disease which not even Veritas's doctors can fix. Jack finds his only hope lies in the one-in-a-million chance the disease will go into spontaneous remission (he read about such miracles in magazines he burned). Since he must keep his son's spirits up for there to be even the slightest chance of remission, he has to learn to lie . . . to say, in effect, there's nothing wrong, so keep your spirits up.

He decides to find a mysterious group of rebels called dissemblers, who seem not only to be able to lie, but who enjoy doing it in public—putting on little plays and skits in the street, and beating hasty retreats whenever the police show up. Perhaps they can teach him to lie to his son.

So Jack Sperry begins a voyage of self-discovery. The reader sees the strangeness of his world—and it is strange—and meets a goodly cast of quirky people. The writing is crisp, fast-paced, and nicely visual. The plot is fantastic yet convincingly played out. And the world has been thoroughly thought out. In all, a strong addition to the St. Martin's line of novellas.

The only quibble remains typesetting. Once again, St. Martin's used the British pages, with British punctuation and spelling. A major New York publisher can certainly do better than that. — *J. Betancourt*

OUTNUMBERING THE DEAD

by Frederik Pohl
St. Martin's Press
110 pages, \$14.95 (hardcover)

Another of St. Martin's novellas, *Outnumbering the Dead* is one of the best Pohl short works in recent years. Centuries from now, humanity has reached a near utopia. Diseases have been eliminated. Lukewarm fusion provides virtually limitless energy. And a special operation on unborn children can usually short-cir-

cuit the aging process and give a person near immortality.

Raphiel is one of the unlucky few on whom the immortality operation failed. Operations have prolonged his life, and given him a decent enough lifespan, but he's wearing out, and the end is not far away.

As a video star, his place in the public spotlight will be brief—but for now his star burns very brightly because an adoring public knows his stay among them *will* be brief, relatively speaking.

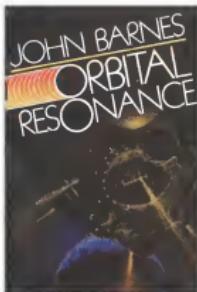
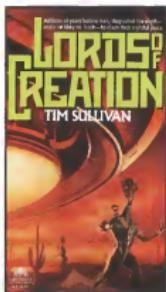
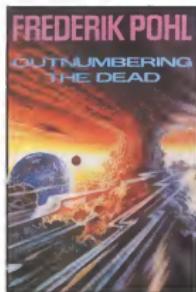
He has only one regret in his life: he loved an immortal woman, and lost her. When she discovers he's dying and returns to him, she does have a purpose in mind—but the book is primarily a bittersweet love story played out on one of the most fantastic canvases in recent years.

Pohl's manipulation of emotions—the readers', the characters—is nothing short of masterful, and *Outnumbering the Dead* packs quite an emotional wallop. It's definitely of award caliber, and definitely recommended. — *J. Betancourt*

GONE TO EARTH

by Roger Zelazny
Pulphouse Publishing
100 pages, \$5.00 (paperback);
\$25.00 (hardcover)

This is the twenty-seventh *Author's Choice Monthly* volume from Pulphouse Publishing, and it's one of the best. (Other highlights in the series are the Joe Lansdale and Nina Kiriki



Hoffman volumes.) Here, Zelazny picks four stories he had fun writing (he explains why in a brief introduction)—and the ride starts with a bang and a whoop.

In "Deadboy Donner and the Filston Cup" we meet a bunch of career space-racers, who tangle with each other as well as a semi-malign artificial intelligence just dying to get into a human body—*any* human body, even if it's already inhabited. It's a fun mish-mosh, in classic Damon Runyon style, exactly as Zelazny intended.

"Kalifriki of the Thread" is an odd science-fantasy involving a trans-dimensional chase. It defies description; although it's a bit hard to get into, it's vintage Zelazny once you're there—full of quirky characters, pleasant turns of phrase, and odd views of life.

"Devil Car" and "The Last of the Wild Ones" both feature the same protagonist, although the stories were written fifteen years apart. Here, artificial intelligence in cars has gone awry in a few instances, and now rogue cars prowl the western wastelands, raiding gas stations and refineries, scavenging spare parts, and doing mischief only sentient cars can do. The leader of these devil cars is a Cadillac, smarter and faster than all the rest, and mean as all get-out. It even carries the skeleton of its original driver behind the wheel . . . it murdered the man before taking off for the wild life.

The Caddy killed Murdock's broth-

er some years before, and he's been out for revenge ever since. He had a custom-built car named Jenny especially armed for the mission, and the two of them are out searching for the devil car and his gang. When they meet, only one of them will roll away . . .

"Devil Car" was my favorite of the bunch—a lot of fun, like the best of Zelazny's novels.

Copies can be found at many specialty bookstores, or you can get them directly from the publisher: *Publhouse Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 1227, Eugene, OR 97440*. — *J. Betancourt*

DOOMSDAY BOOK

by Connie Willis

Bantam Spectra Books, June 1992

448 pages, \$22.00 (hardcover);

\$10.00 (trade paperback)

Is there such a thing as medieval science fiction, as opposed to medieval fantasy? Before reading *Doomsday Book*, I'd have said there wasn't. Now I'm not so sure. This novel from award-winner Connie Willis is clearly SF, yet it presents a more historically convincing portrait of fourteenth-century England than nearly any work of fantasy one cares to name.

In fact, only about two-thirds of the book actually takes place in the Middle Ages. The remaining third is more than a framing story but not really a subplot, combining the project that sends student-scholar Kivrin

Engle back in time with the unexpected eruption of a viral epidemic that may prevent her sponsors from successfully bringing her back. Willis doesn't quite make this part of the story jell; it has dramatic tension, but of the sort that's irritating rather than intriguing, and the parallels between the modern and medieval narratives never really fall into place.

Once Willis follows Kivrin into history, though, she weaves an utterly persuasive tale of a time and place that are unexpectedly alien, populated by people who are unexpectedly human. And rather than being an impartial observer, Kivrin finds herself drawn inexorably into the lives of her hosts as they cope with a crisis Kivrin was never meant to experience. The images of village life, religion, and the tenuous boundaries between childhood and maturity are crafted with care and precision. Willis doesn't romanticize the period, but neither does she remove all emotion from her narrative—quite the contrary, in fact.

If it were purely a historical time-travel novel, *Doomsday Book* would be an unqualified success with every chance of snapping up awards left and right. Its limitation comes in trying to fit the medieval tale together with its counterpart in Willis's version of the next century. She clearly intends to draw comparisons between the two settings, but stops short of drawing any real link between the congruent plots, and that caution translates into a rather odd

note of uncertainty that lingers in the future sections of the book. As it is, Willis has written a book that's solid and intriguing, but doesn't quite live up to its ambitions. — *J. Bunnell*

LORDS OF CREATION

by Tim Sullivan
AvoNova, April 1992
242 pages, \$3.99 (paperback)

Take a first contact, a nest of dinosaurs, and a U.S. government overrun by Christian fundamentalists, and you could well wind up with a very messy novel. Tim Sullivan includes all of the above in *Lords of Creation*, but the result isn't a mess—it's a compact yarn that does surprisingly well at balancing broad philosophical issues with close attention to character development.

We start with a fossil exploration in rural Montana, where David Albee and friends discover a peculiar box that proves to contain living dinosaur eggs. With the help of veterinarian and former lover Liz Tomlinson, David and his scientific colleagues manage to hatch the eggs, learning in the process that the box was of alien origin and that the beings who left it are returning to Earth for a visit. Meanwhile, the government is decidedly upset about a discovery that undercuts its creationist teachings, and is doing its best to stage-manage events to its own advantage.

Sullivan does a good job of telescoping the plot down to manageable proportions; with very few exceptions, the story sticks close to David and to the clutch of rapidly growing saurians. The creatures themselves are well designed, unusual yet credible and not unduly anthropomorphic. They're clever and sometimes playful, but they are by no means cute and are quite capable of living down to their carnivorous instincts.

The portrayal of the fundamentalists is equally impressive. These aren't stereotyped, one-dimensional villains; they're people whose beliefs have been badly shaken by events, and they react as individuals, some-

times diplomatically and sometimes with dangerous fervor. While scientifically minded readers may not like what these characters stand for, it's hard not to respect them by the end of the book.

What may be most intriguing about *Lords of Creation* is that, underneath all the aliens and dinosaurs and creationists, it's really a novel about human potential and choices—and one that doesn't hit readers over the head with its message. Sullivan weaves his story with an articulate hand, a moderate pace, and just enough angst to give it a thoughtful tone without turning it into a sermon or a science text. (Think of James Hogan's "Giants" novels with the hard edges filed off.)

One last peculiar item may bear mentioning. I finished the novel with the vague sense that I'd read about David and Liz before—then realized that I had. Sullivan's style and setting resemble those of fellow Avon author Tom Deitz, whose best-known series focuses on characters named David and Liz. That's an editorial coincidence that should have been avoided—but it shouldn't be held against either writer, especially not when both are producing solid work. — *J. Bunnell*

THE GYPSY

by Steven Brust
and Megan Lindholm
Tor Books, July 1992
288 pages, \$18.95 (hardcover)

Steven Brust lives in Minnesota, Megan Lindholm in Washington state. *The Gypsy* is halfway between, in a modern Midwestern city where something is not quite right with reality. It's the novel readers have been waiting for since Lindholm's *Wizard of the Pigeons* appeared five years ago, with Brust's knowledge of Hungarian folklore lending it an extra dash of polish and spice.

Most "urban faerie" novels follow characters who confront magic in the streets head-on and adapt quickly to its presence. Lindholm and Brust flip the pattern inside out. Veteran cop Stepovich sees only magic's results, and pursues mundane

answers till the last possible moment. Meanwhile, the gypsy Cigány and the mysterious Coachman are so steeped in magic that they're barely able to cope with the city's normal denizens. Yet Stepovich and Cigány are the two who must join forces and act in order to halt a deadly magical conspiracy, and only the Coachman can take them where they must go.

There's a harder edge here than is usual in this kind of novel, courtesy of the focus on decidedly unglamorous police procedure. But it's balanced by an equal and opposite sense of folklore in the storytelling—characters who are labeled as Owl and Wolf and Raven, hench-creatures drawn from gypsy traditions, ordinary objects overlaid with mystical properties. And intriguingly, like the characters, the twin threads of normalcy and magic are held mostly apart until the very end, when Lindholm and Brust spin them together in a climax that gets much of its drama from the sudden, violent juxtaposition.

While the characters are strong and the structure is ingenious, the pacing isn't an unqualified success. It's easy to get wrapped up in *The Gypsy* and start reading too fast, at which point it grows difficult to keep the secondary characters straight. But it's also easy to overcompensate, to take the novel too slowly, to the extent that it loses the sense of danger that's the essential ingredient of a suspense novel. Brust and Lindholm unfold the story in a way that's perfectly appropriate for the characters, but there aren't quite enough handholds in the narrative for readers to grab onto as they pass.

As flaws go, however, that's an encouraging sort of problem. The solution is simply to read the novel again—and *The Gypsy* is the sort of novel that, like leftover goulash, just gets better the second time around. It's a remarkable collaboration, and a memorable one. — *J. Bunnell*

ANVIL OF STARS

by Greg Bear
Warner Books, May 1992
448 pages, \$19.95 (hardcover)

If you were to ask me to name a book less likely to need a sequel than Greg Bear's wonderful *Forge of God*, I'd be hard pressed to name one. After all, when that book ends the Earth has been destroyed, the vast majority of humanity is dead, and a few token members have been saved by an alien society to be given a chance to make a fresh start, safe from the machines that killed Earth.

What's left? Starting over—and vengeance.

The Ships of the Law—the beings that rescued what they could of the earth, are a consortium of beings that have banded together to protect stars from the killer societies and to seek out and destroy those societies where possible. While working with the adults to terraform Mars and make it habitable, the aliens take the children off on an interstellar adventure in search of the society that killed Earth to give humanity its vengeance.

Within this framework Bear has put together a look at the concept of revenge, and whether the cost of vengeance is worth it.

During the search, the children grow up, and are nurtured and taught by the Mothers, mobile robots controlled by the Ship. Calling themselves the Lost Boys and the Wendys (one of a number of references of classical children's literature in the book) train for their task of destroying the destroyers.

It's not that simple, though. After all these years, some question the correctness of the task. On top of this, human nature being what it is, the group dynamics of this mini-society create conflicts among the children (who think of themselves as such, even though they're into early adulthood). By placing themselves into the never-never land of the Ship of the Law and building their society around the paradigm of the Lost Boys and the Wendys, they have arrested their own growth and emo-

tional development. Lost Boys and Wendys they are, children until their one goal in life—the destruction of their killers—propels them into adulthood.

When a probable target is located, this fantastic charade is ripped away and reality sets in. If these are the killers, do the children of Earth have the right to destroy them? Can we afford to not destroy them and put other, unknown societies at risk? Is "eye for an eye" an acceptable solution? Can it even be proven that they are the killers, and what happens if it can't?

Can a Ship of the Law and its inhabitants destroy a society advanced enough to re-engineer star systems and hostile enough to create machines that can travel between stars just to destroy life? By passing judgment, do we join our killers and become damned? Or do we rise above them and finally free ourselves of the burden?

Greg Bear is dealing with some heavy concepts here, and doesn't shirk from the task. Sometimes, there are no single "right" answers and people struggle through to do the best they can in imperfect realities. Bear successfully brings it all together to an acceptable, positive conclusion, but doesn't provide any 'easy answers to the questions he puts to his Lost Boys and his Wendys.

And, not inconsequentially, to his readers. This is a powerful work that is going to make you sit and think for a while, and hopefully disturb you just a little. A powerful hard SF novel from one of the top writers in the field. — *C. Von Rospach*

ORBITAL RESONANCE

by John Barnes
Tor Books, December 1991
214 pages, \$17.95

Orbital Resonance is, simply, my choice for best book of 1991. It was originally one of those books that I never got around to reading due to lack of time, but I kept running into people raving about it and finally decided to check it out for myself.

I'm very glad I did, and if you read only one book this year, *Or-*

bital Resonance should be the one. John Barnes is obviously a fan of Heinlein, because what we have here is a juvenile, exactly the kind of book that Heinlein would have written if he were to try to write *Podkayne of Mars* or *Have Spacesuit Will Travel* in the 1990s.

That's a tall order, but Barnes is up to the task. The story is told in terms of a book—actually closer to a diary—by Melpomene Murray, a thirteen-year-old girl who lives on the space station *Flying Dutchman*. As part of a public relations plan to help earthbound people better understand what it means to live in space, and therefore be more willing to continue supporting it, the administration of the space station ask Melpomene to write about her experiences and her life so that they can be made available to the ground-dwellers.

Orbital Resonance is a story of coming of age and a loss of innocence. We watch as Melpomene starts as a child and slowly becomes aware of herself and aware of the world around her, from completely trusting to uncomfortably aware of the politics of her peer group and of the ship administration as a whole—not to mention the part that she plays in it.

Barnes has built a fascinating and complex environment for her to wander through, a small, self-contained world that runs from zero-gravity to almost Earth normal. The vagaries of living in space imply many changes, both subtle and not, in the way people live and the way societies are run, and Barnes has carefully thought through the implications of low-gravity living and put together a fully functioning society that is a real space society and not simply a transplanted earth town. He emphasizes this point with a number of subtle hints. Even though she is part of the first generation born in space, it's clear that her upbringing has diverged sharply from the children of the same age on earth. Barnes has built a society that is simultaneously familiar and alien.

As she grows more aware of the happenings around her and the po-

litical aspects of ship's life, Melpomene starts to question more of her assumptions, including the real reasons why she's writing this book. Her quest for the truth brings ever more of the space society forward for the reader to enjoy, until Barnes finally allows the reader to view the entire tapestry, with all of the complexities and inconsistencies and flaws that any real society would have.

A fascinating read, reminiscent of the best of Heinlein but an exciting work in its own right, I can't recommend *Orbital Resonance* strongly enough. This one is a must-read. — *C. Von Rospach*

GLASS HOUSES

by Laura J. Mixon
Tor Books, May 1992
224 pages, \$3.99 (paperback)

If more cyberpunk stories were like *Glass Houses*, I'd like more cyberpunk stories. In this first novel from Mixon, we follow Ruby Kubick, a young, horribly agoraphobic woman who is a professional salvager. By using various remotely controlled machines—effectively the modern, cyberspace-enhanced versions of Heinlein's waldoes—she carries out operations to locate and return material of use from damaged buildings in the Manhattan area.

It is one such trip, attempt to recover some data disks from a building scheduled to be demolished (in the midst of a hurricane, no less) that she runs across something she hadn't expected: a man, injured and stranded in a condemned building where he had no business being. When the building collapses on top of them, the man is killed, the salvage destroyed and Ruby is barely able to get her waldo functional and back out of the building to the police with the corpse.

That's when her real problems begin. Losing the salvage upsets her client, a fellow salvager named Vetch with a rather uncomfortable set of ethics. The corpse turns out to be Dr. Youhanna Nasser, a philanthropist, one of the nation's wealthiest men and the last person anyone

(especially the police) would expect to be found in a collapsing skyscraper.

This starts a chain of events that forces Ruby into trying to deal with Vetch, repair her damaged waldo, and figure out how Nasser got where he was and why he was there in the first place so she can clear herself of the questions the police have.

Glass Houses is a very strong first novel, and Mixon shows a deft sense of characterization and a good ability to build complex plots in innovative and interesting environments. It's an auspicious beginning that I hope will turn into a long and fruitful career for her. — *C. Von Rospach*

THE TRIKON DECEPTION

by Ben Bova and Bill Pogue
Tor Books, February 1992
309 pages, \$19.95 (hardcover)

Most hard science fiction is about hardware. If authors are going to go to the trouble of creating an environment for their story, they'll generally take some pride in showing it off and making it a prominent part of the work. With all the work that goes into doing it right, you can't blame them.

Some authors go beyond that, though. Instead of featuring the hardware, the hardware goes into the background and they get on with the task of telling an interesting story. Case in point is *The Trikon Deception*. Bova, a Hugo-winning author, has teamed up with one of the astronauts from the Skylab missions to take a look at what it means to spend a long time in the limited environment of a space station.

The Trikon station was set up by a international (Trikon stands for Tri-continental, meaning Japan, Europe and the U. S.) commercial consortium as a place for research that is deemed too risky to be done on planet. The majority of this work entails genetic engineering, as the various groups try to develop organisms that can deal with the worsening toxic waste problems on Earth.

In theory, everyone is supposed to be cooperating on the joint ven-

ture, but as usually happens in situations like these, each of the major groups in the consortium are all out looking for that little edge that can mean big profits. On top of that, Britain, which opted out of the European consortium, has planted some operatives in the hopes of grabbing the technology for its own uses before the consortium catches on.

What this is, then, is a spy-thriller story that happens to be set in space. Bova, in fact, claims that it isn't science fiction at all (and Tor isn't marketing it as SF). He has a point, but this is also one of those books that proves how flexible SF is, in that it can be used as a framework for working in almost any other fictional genre successfully.

This is a book that deals with the problems of the conflicts between the long-term needs of society in general and the short-term interests of people and political entities—a conflict that is very relevant today in our own world. This is SF in that it's set in a (albeit very likely) near future in an environment that doesn't currently exist, but at the same time none of the technology is beyond our current capabilities—that we choose to not build it is different from being unable to.

While we sit and watch all of the groups fight their own personal battles, we wonder who, if anyone, is going to win theirs, and to what lengths they'll go for the victory. Whether it's O'Donnell fighting to remain clean from his addiction or Jaekel fighting for his next sexual conquest or Ramsanjawi fighting for his return to Oxford or Fabio Bianco fighting to save the planet from itself, you're not sure until the very end exactly who is doing what to whom and what lengths desperation will take them.

The Trikon Deception is a good read that'll keep you turning pages from beginning to end, well written and gripping, with very real people and the strong, sometimes conflicting motivations they bring with them. Definitely recommended. — *C. Von Rospach* ♦

The Ship Who Searched

Part Two: Brancher

Anne McCaffrey
and
Mercedes Lackey

CenCom's softperson operator had a pleasant voice and an equally pleasant habit of *not* starting a call with a burst of static or an alert-beep. "XH One-Oh-Three-Three, you have an incoming transmission. Canned message beam."

Tia tore herself away from the latest papers on the Salomon-Kildaire Entities with a purely mental sigh of regret. Oh, she could take in a databurst *and* scan the papers at the same time, certainly, but she wanted to do more than simply scan the information. She wanted to absorb it, so she could think about it later in detail. There were nuances to academic papers that simple scanning wouldn't reveal; places where



Illustration by Stephen Hickman

you had to know the personality of the author in order to read between the lines. Places where what *wasn't* written was as important as what *was*.

"Go ahead, CenCom," she replied, wondering who on earth—or off it, for that matter—could be calling her. *Strange how we've been out of Terran subspace for so long, and yet we still use expressions like "bow on earth" . . . there's probably a popular-science paper in that.*

The central screen directly opposite the column she was housed in flickered for a moment, then filled with the image of a thin-faced man in an elaborate Moto-Chair. No—more than a Moto-Chair; this one was kind of a platform for something else. She saw what could only be an APU, and a short-beam broadcast unit of some kind. It looked like his legs and waist were encased in the bottom half of space armor!

But there was no mistaking who was in the strange exoskeleton, Doctor Kenny.

"Tia, my darling girl, congratulations on your graduation!" Kenny said, eyes twinkling. "You should—given the vagaries of the CenCom postal system—have gotten your graduation present from Lars and Anna and me. I hope you liked it—them—"

The graduation present *bad* arrived on time, and Tia had been enthralled. She loved instrumental music, synth-com in particular, but these recordings had special meaning for any shellperson, for they had been composed and played by David Weber-Tcherkasky, a shellperson himself, and they were not meant for the limited ears of softpersons. The composer had made use of every note of the aural spectrum, with supercomplexes of overtones and counterpoint that left softpersons squinting in bewilderment. They weren't for everyone—not even for some shellpersons—but Tia didn't think she would ever get tired of listening to them. Every time she played them, she heard something new.

"—anyway, I remembered you saying in your last transmission how much you liked Lanz Manhem's synth-com recordings, and Lars kept telling me that Tcherkasky's work was to Manhem's what a symphony was to birdsong." Kenny shrugged, and grinned. "We figured that it would help to while away the in-transit hours for you, anyway. Anna said the graduation was stellar—I'm sorry I couldn't be there, but you're looking at the reason why."

He made a face, and gestured down at the lower half of his body. "Moto-Prosthetics decided in their infinite wisdom that since I had benefited from their expertise in the past, I *owed* them. They convinced the Hospital Admin Head that I was the only possible person to test this contraption of theirs. This is *supposed* to be something that will let me stroll around a room—or more importantly, stand in an operating theater for as long as I need to. When it's working, that is." He shook his head. "Buggy as a new software system, let me tell you. Yesterday the fardling thing locked up on me, with one foot in the air. Wasn't I just a charming sight, posing like in the middle of the hall like a dancer in a Greek frieze! Think I'm going to rely on my old Chair when I really *need* to do something, at least for a while."

Tia chuckled at the mental image of Kenny frozen in place and unable to move.

He shook his head and laughed. "Well, between this piece of—ah—hardware, and my patients, I had to send Anna as our official deputation. Hope you've forgiven Lars and me, sweetheart—"

A voice, warm and amused, interrupted Doctor Kenny. "There was just a wee problem with *my* getting leave, after all," Lars said, over the office speakers, as Kenny grinned. "And they simply wouldn't let me de-orbit the station and take it down to the Schools for the graduation ceremony. *Very* inconsiderate of them, I say."

Tia had to laugh at that.

"That just means you'll have to come visit *me*. Now that you're one of the club, far-traveler, we'll have to exchange softie-jokes. How many softies *does* it take to change a lightbulb?"

Kenny made a rude noise. Although he looked tired, Tia noted that he seemed to be in very good spirits. There was only one thing that combination meant; he'd pulled off another miracle. "I resemble that remark," he said. "Anyway, Lars got your relay number, so you'll be hearing from us—probably more often than you want! We love you, lady! Big Zen hugs from both of us!"

The screen flickered, and went blank; Tia sighed with contentment. Lars had been the one to come up with "Zen hugs"—"the hugs that you would get, if we were there, if we could hug you, but we aren't, and we can't"—and he and Kenny began using them in their weekly transmissions to Tia all through School. Before long her entire class began using the phrase, so pointedly apt for shellpersons, and now it was spreading across known space. Kenny had been amused, especially after one of his recovering patients got the phrase in a transmission from his stay-at-home, technophobic wife!

That transmission put the cap on her day. The perfect climax to the beginning of her new life. Anna and her parents at the graduation ceremony, Professor Brogen handing out the special awards she'd gotten in xenology, diplomacy, and first contact studies, Moira showing up at the landing field the same day she was installed in her ship, still with Tomas, wonder of wonders. . . .

Having Moira there to figuratively hold her hand during the nasty process of partial anesthesia while the techs hooked her up in her column had been worth platinum.

She shuddered at the memory. Oh, they could *describe* the feelings (or rather, lack of them) to you, they could psych you up for the experience, and you *thought* you were ready, but the moment of truth, when you lost everything but primitive com and the few sensors in the shell itself . . . was horrible. Something out of the worst of nightmares.

And she still remembered what it had been like to live with only softperson senses. She couldn't imagine what it was like for those who'd been popped into a shell at birth. It had brought back all the fear and feeling of helplessness of her time in the hospital.

It had been easier with Moira there. But if the transfer had been a journey through sensory-deprivation hell, waking up in the ship had been pure heaven.

No amount of simulator training conveyed what it *really* felt like to have a living, breathing ship wrapped around you.

It was a moment that had given her back everything she had lost. Never mind that her "skin" was durally metal, her "legs" were engines, her "arms" the servos she used to maintain herself inside and out. That her "lungs" and "heart" were the life-support systems that would keep her brawn alive. That all of her senses were ship's sensors linked through brainstem relays. None of that mattered. She had a body again! That was a moment of ecstasy no one plugged into a shell at birth would ever understand. Moira did, though . . . and it had been wonderful to be able to share that moment of elation.

And Tomas understood, as only a brawn-partner of long standing could. Tomas had arranged for Theodore Edward Beat to have his own little case built into the wall of the central cabin as *his* graduation present. "And decom anyone who doesn't understand," he said firmly, putting a newly cleaned Ted behind his plexi panel and closing the door. "A brawn is only a brawn, but a bear is a friend for life!"

So now the solemn little blue bear in his Courier Service shirt reigned as silent supervisor over the central cabin, and to perdition with whatever the brawns made of him. Well, let them think it was some kind of odd holo-art. Speaking of which, the next set of brawn-candidates was due shortly. *We'll see how they react to Ted.*

Tia returned to her papers, keeping a running statistical analysis and cross-tabulations on anything that seemed interesting. And there *were* things that seemed to be showing up, actually. Pockets of mineral depletions in the area around the EsKay sites; an astonishing similarity in the periodicity and seasonality of the planets and planetoids. Insofar as a Mars-type world could *have* seasons, that is. But the periodicity—identical to within an hour. Interesting. Had they been *that* dependent on natural sunlight? Come to think of it—yes, solar distances were very similar. And they were all Sol-type stars.

She turned her attention to her parents' latest papers, letting the EsKay discoveries stew in the back of her mind. Pota and Braddon were the Schliemanns of modern archeology, but it wasn't the EsKays that brought them fame, at least, not directly. After Tia's illness, they couldn't bring themselves to return to their old dig, or even the EsKay project—and for once, the Institute committees acted like something other than AIs with chips instead of hearts. Pota and Braddon were reassigned to a normal-atmosphere water-world of high volcanic activity and thousands of tiny islands with a good population of nomadic sentients, something as utterly unlike the EsKay planets as possible. And it had been there that they made their discovery. Tracing the legends of the natives, of a king who first defied the gods and then challenged them, they replicated Schliemann's famous discovery of ancient Troy, uncovering an entire city buried by a volcanic eruption. Perfectly preserved for all time. For this world and these people, it was the equivalent of an Atlantis and Pompeii combined, for the city was of Bronze Age technology while the latter-day sentients

were still struggling along with flint, obsidian, and shell, living in villages of no more than two hundred. While the natives of the present day were amphibious, leaning toward the aquatic side, *these* ancients were almost entirely creatures of dry land. . . .

The discovery made Pota and Braddon's reputation; there was more than enough there to keep fifty archeologists busy for a hundred years. Ta'hianna became their life-project, and they rarely left the site anymore. They even established a permanent residence aboard a kind of glorified houseboat.

Tia enjoyed reading their papers—and the private speculations they had brought her, with some findings that weren't in the papers yet—but the Ta'hianna project simply didn't give her the thrill of mystery that the EsKays did.

And—there was one other thing. Years of analyzing every little nuance of those dreadful weeks had made her decide that what had happened to her could just as easily happen to some other unwitting archeologist. Or even . . . another child.

Only finding the homeworld of the EsKays would give the Institute and Central World's Medical the information they needed to prevent another tragedy like Tia's.

If Tia had anything at all to say about it, *that* would never happen again. The next person infected might not be so lucky. The next person, if an adult, or even a child unfortunate enough to be less flexible and less intelligent than she had been, would likely have no choice but to spend the remainder of a fairly miserable life in a Moto-Chair and a room. . . .

"XH One-Oh-Three-Three, your next set of brawn-candidates is ready," CenCom said, interrupting her brooding thoughts. "You *are* going to pick one of these, aren't you?" the operator added wearily.

"I don't know yet," she replied levelly. "I haven't interviewed them." She had rejected the first set of six entirely. CenCom obviously thought she was being a prima donna. *She* simply thought she was being appropriately careful. After all, since she was officially assigned to A and E with special assignment to the Institute, she had gotten precisely what she expected—a ship *without* Singularity drive. Those were top of the line, expensive, and not the sort of thing that the Institute could afford to hire. So, like Moira, she would be spending a *lot* of time in transit. Unlike Moira, she did not intend to find herself bouncing brawns so often that her buyout had doubled because of the fines.

Spending a lot of time in transit meant a lot of time with only her brawn for company. She wanted someone who was bright, first of all. At least as bright as Tomas and Charlie. She wanted someone who would be willing to add her little crusade to the standard agenda, and give it equal weight to what they had officially been assigned. She rather thought she would like to have a male, although she hadn't rejected any of the brawns just because they were female.

Most of all, she wanted someone who would *like* her; someone who would be a real partner in every sense. Someone who would willingly spend time with her when

he could be doing other things; a friend, like Kenny and Anna, Moira and Lars.

And someone with some personality. Two of the last batch—both females—had exhibited all the personality of a cube of tofu.

That might do for another ship, another brain that didn't want to be bothered with softpersons outside of duty, but she wanted someone she could *talk* to! After all, she had been a softperson once.

"Who's first?" she asked CenCom, lowering her lift so that he—or she—could come aboard without having to climb the stairs.

"That'll be Donning Chang y Narhan," CenCom replied after a moment. "Really high marks in the Academy."

She scanned the databurst as Donning crossed the tarmac to the launch pad; he'd gotten high marks all right, though not stellar. Much like her; in the top tenth of the class, but not the top one percent. Very handsome, if the holo was to be believed; wavy blond hair, bright blue eyes, sculptured face with holo-star looks—sculptured body, too. But Tia was wary of good looks by now. Two of the first lot had been gorgeous; one had been one of the blocks of tofu, with nothing between the ears but what the Academy had put there, and the other had only wanted to talk about himself.

Movement outside alerted her to Donning's arrival; to her annoyance, he operated the lift manually instead of letting her handle it.

To her further annoyance, he treated her like some kind of superior AI; he was obviously annoyed with having to go through an interview in the first place, and wanted to be elsewhere.

"Donning Chang y Narhan, reporting," he said in a bored tone of voice, "as ordered." He proceeded to rattle off everything that had been in the short file, as if she couldn't access it herself. He did not sit down. He paid no attention to Ted.

"Have you any questions?" he asked, making it sound as if questions would only mean that she had not been paying attention.

"Only a few," she replied. "What is your favorite composer? Do you play chess?"

He answered her questions curtly, as if they were so completely irrelevant that he couldn't believe she was asking them.

She obliged him by suggesting that he could leave after only a handful of questions; he took it with bad grace and left in a hurry, an aroma of scorched ego in his wake.

"Garrison Lebrel," CenCom said, as Donning vacated the lift.

Well, Garrison was possible. Good academic marks, not as high as Donning's but not bad. Interest in archeology . . . she perked up when she saw *what* he was interested in. Nonhumans, especially presumed extinct spacegoing races, including the EsKays!

Garrison let her bring him in, and proved to be talkative, if not precisely congenial. He was *very* intense.

"We'll be spending a lot of time in transit," he said. "I wasn't able to keep up with the current literature in

archeology while I was in the Academy, and I planned to do a lot of reading."

Not exactly sociable. "Do you play chess?" she asked hopefully. He shook his head. "But I do play sennet. That's an ancient Egyptian game—I have a very interesting software version I could install; I doubt it would take you long to learn it, though it takes a lifetime to master."

The last was said a bit smugly. And there had been no offer from him to learn *her* game. Still, she did have access to far more computing power than he did; it wouldn't take her more than an hour to learn the game.

"I see that your special interest is in extinct spacegoing races," she ventured. "I have a very strong background in the Salomon-Kildaire Entities."

He looked skeptical. "I think Doctor Russell Gaines-Barklen had probably dealt with them as fully as they need to be, although we'll probably have some chances to catch things survey teams miss. That's the benefit of being trained to look for specifics."

She finally sent him back with mixed feelings. He was arrogant, no doubt about it. But he was also competent. He shared her interests, but his pet theories differed wildly from hers. He was possible, if there were no other choices, but he wasn't what she was looking for.

"Chria Chance is up next," CenCom said when she reported she was ready for the next. "But you won't like her."

"Why, because she's got a name that's obviously assumed?" Neither CenCom nor the Academy cared what you called yourself, provided they knew the identity you had been born with and the record that went with it. Every so often someone wanted to adopt a pseudonym. Often it was to cover a famous High Family name—either because the bearer was a black sheep, or because (rarely) he or she didn't want special treatment. But sometimes a youngster got a notion into his or her head to take on a holostar-type name.

"No," CenCom said, not bothering to hide his amusement. "You won't like her because . . . well, you'll see."

Chria's records were good, about like Garrison's—with one odd note in the Personality Profile. *Nonconformist*, it said.

Well, there was nothing wrong with that. Pota and Braddon were certainly not conformists in any sense.

But the moment that Chria stepped into the central room, Tia knew that CenCom was right.

She wore her Academy uniform, all right—but it was a specially tailored one. Made entirely of leather; real leather, not synthetic. And she wore it entirely too well for Tia to feel comfortable around her. For the rest, she was rapier-thin, with a face like a clever fox and hair cut aggressively short. Tia already felt intimidated, and she hadn't even said anything yet!

Within a few minutes worth of questions, Chria shook her head. "You're a nice person, Tia," she said forthrightly, "and you and I would never partner well. I'd run right over you, and you'd sit there in your column, fuming and resentful, and you'd never say a word." She grinned with feral cheer. "I'm a carnivore, a hunter. I need someone who'll fight back! I enjoy a good fight!"

"You'd probably have us go chasing right after pirates," Tia said, a little resentful already. "If there were any in the neighborhood, you'd want us to look for them!"

"You bet I would," Chria responded without shame.

A few more minutes of exchange proved to Tia that Chria was right. It would never work. With a shade of regret, Tia bade her farewell. While she liked a good argument as well as the next person, she *didn't* like arguments to turn into shouting matches, which was precisely what Chria enjoyed. She claimed it purged tensions.

Well, maybe it did. And maybe that was why her favorite form of music—to the exclusion of everything else—was opera. She was a fanatic, to put it simply. And Tia . . . well . . . wasn't.

But there was certainly a lot of emotion-purging and carrying on in those old operas. She had the feeling that Chria fancied herself as a kind of latter-day Valkyrie.

Ho-yo-to-bo.

She reported her rejection to CenCom, with the recommendation that *she* thought Chria Chance had the proper mental equipment to partner a ship in the Military Courier Service. "Between you, me, and the airwaves," CenCom replied, "that's my opinion too. Bloodthirsty wench. Well, she'll get her chance. Military got your classmate Pol, and he's just as bloody-minded as she is. I'll see the recommendation goes in; meanwhile, next up is Harkonen Carl-Ulbright."

Carl was a disappointment. Average grades, and while he was congenial, Tia knew that *she* would run right over the top of *him*. He was shy, hardly ever ventured an opinion, and when he did, he could be induced to change it in a heartbeat. However—"Carl," she said, just before he went to the lift, making no effort to hide his discouragement, "my classmate Raul is the XR One-Oh-Two-Nine. I think you two would get along splendidly. I'm going to ask CenCom to set up your very next interview with him—he was just installed today and *I know* he hasn't got a brawn yet. Tell him I sent you."

That cheered up the young man considerably. He would be even more cheered when he learned that Raul had a Singularity Drive ship. And Tia would bet that his Personality Profile and Raul's matched to a hair. They'd make a great team, especially when their job included carrying VIP passengers. Neither of them would get in the way, or resent it if the VIPs ignored them.

"I got all that, Tia," CenCom said as soon as the boy was gone. "Consider it logged. They ought to make you a Psych; a Counselor, at least. It was good of you to think of Raul; none of us could come up with a match for him, but we were trying to match him with females."

If she'd had hands, she would have thrown them up. "Become a Psych! Saints and agents of grace defend us!" she quipped. "I think *not!* Who's next?"

"Andrea Polo y De Gras," CenCom said. "You won't like her, either. She doesn't want you."

"With the Polo y De Gras name, I'm not surprised," Tia sighed. "Wants something with a little more zing to it than A and E, hmm? Would she be offended if I agreed with her before she bothered to come out here?"

"I doubt it," CenCom replied, "But let me check." A pause, and then he came back. "She's very pleased, actually. I think that she has something cooking with the Family, and the strings haven't had time to get pulled yet. Piff. High Families. I don't know *why* they send their children to Space Academy in the first place."

Tia felt moved to contradict him. "Because some of them do very well, and become a credit to the Services," she replied, with just a hint of reproach.

"True, and I stand corrected. Well, your last brawn-candidate is the late Alexander Joli-Chanteu." The cheer in his voice told her that he was making a bad joke out of the situation.

"Late, hmm? That isn't going to earn *him* any gold stars in his Good-Bee Book." Tia said, a bit acidly. Her parents' fetish for punctuality had set a standard she expected those around her to match. *Especially* brawn-candidates.

"Well, I can at least go over his records. She scanned them quickly, and came up—confused. When Alexander was good, he was very, very, good. And when he was bad, he was abysmal. Often in the same subject. He would begin a class with the lowest marks possible, then suddenly catch fire, turn around, and pull off a miraculous save at the end of the semester. *Erratic performances*, said his Personality Profile. Tia not only agreed, she thought that the Evaluator was understating the case.

CenCom interrupted her confusion. "Whoop! He got right by me! Here he comes, Tia, ready or not!"

Alexander didn't bother with the lift; he ran up the stairs, arriving out of breath, with longish hair mussed and uniform rumpled.

That didn't earn him any points either, although it was better than Chria's leather.

He took a quick look around to orient himself, then turned immediately to face the central column where she was housed, a nicely that only Carl and Chria had observed. It didn't matter, really, and a lot of shellpersons didn't care, so long as the softpersons faced one set of "eyes" at least—but Tia felt, as Moira did, that it was more considerate of a brawn to face where you were, rather than empty cabin.

"Hypatia, dear lady, I am most humbly sorry to be late for this interview," he said, slowly catching his breath. "My *sensei* engaged me in a game of Go, and I completely lost all track of time."

He ran his blunt-fingered hand through his unruly dark hair and grinned ruefully, little smile-crinkles forming around his brown eyes. "And here I had a perfectly *wonderful* speech all memorized, about how fitting it is that the lady named for the last Librarian at Alexandria and the brawn named for Alexander should become partners—and the run knocked it right out of my head!"

"Well! He knows where my name came from! Or at least be bad the courtesy and foresight to look it up." Hmm. She considered that for a moment, then put it in the "plus" column. He was not handsome, but he had a pleasant, blocky sort of face. He was short—well, so was the original Alexander, by modern standards and those of his own time. She decided to put his general

looks in the "plus" column too, along with his politeness. While she certainly wasn't going to choose her brawn on the basis of looks, it would be nice to have someone who provided a nice bit of landscape.

"Minus," of course, were for being late, and very untidy when he finally did arrive.

"I think I can bring myself to forgive you," she said dryly. "Although I'm not certain just what exactly de-tainted you."

"Ah . . . besides a hobby of ancient history, Terran history, that is, especially military history and strategy, I, ah . . . I cultivate certain kinds of martial arts." He ran his hand through his hair again, in what was plainly a nervous gesture. "Oriental martial arts. One soft form and one hard form. Tai Chi and Karate. I know most people don't think that's at all necessary, but, well, A and E Couriers are unarmed, and I don't like to think of myself as helpless. Anyway, my *sensei*—that's a martial arts Master—got me involved in a game of Go, and when you're playing against a Master there is *nothing* simple about Go." He bowed his head a moment and looked sheepish. "I lost all track of time, and they had to page me. I really am sorry about making you wait."

Tia wasn't quite sure what to make of that. "Sit down, will you?" she said absently, wondering why, with this fascination with things martial and military, he hadn't shown any interest in the Military Services. "Do you play chess as well?"

He nodded. "Chess, and Othello, and several computer games. And if you have any favorites that I don't know, I would be happy to learn them." He sat quietly, calmly, without any of Garrison's fidgeting. In fact, it was that very contrast with Garrison that had made her decide resolutely *against* that young man. A few months of fidgeting, and she would be ready to trunk him to keep him quiet.

"Why Terran history?" she asked curiously. "That isn't the kind of fascination I'd expect to find in a . . . a space-jockey."

He grinned. It was a very engaging, lopsided grin. "What, haven't you interviewed my classmate Chria yet? Now there is someone with odd fascinations!" Behind the banter, Tia sensed a kind of affection, even though the tips of his ears went lightly red. "I started reading history because I was curious about my name, and got fascinated by Alexander's time period. One thing led to another, and the next thing I knew, every present I was getting was either a historical holotape or a book-disk about history, and I was actually quite happy about the situation."

So he *did* know the origin of her name. "Then why military strategy?"

"Because all challenging games are games of strategy," he said. "I . . . ah . . . have a friend who's really a big games buff, my best friend when I was growing up, and I had to have some kind of edge on him. So I started studying strategy. *That* got me into *The Art of War* and that got me into Zen, which got me into martial arts." He shrugged. "There you have it. One neat package. I think you'd really like Tai Chi; it's all about stress and

energy flow, and patterns, and it's a lot like Singularity Mechanics and—"

"I'm sure," she interrupted, hauling him verbally back by the scruff of his neck. "But why didn't you opt for Military Service?"

"The same reason I studied martial arts—I don't like being helpless, but I don't want to *hurt* anyone," he replied, looking oddly distressed. "Both Tai Chi and Karate are about never using a bit more force than you need to, but Tai Chi is the essence of using greater force against itself, just like in *The Art of War*, and—"

Once again she had to haul him back to the question. He tended to go off on verbal tangents, she noticed. She continued to ask him questions, long after the time she had finished with the other brawns, and when she finally let him go, it was with a sense of dissatisfaction. He was the best choice so far, but although he was plainly both sensitive and intelligent, he showed no signs at all of any interest in *her* field. In fact, she had seen and heard nothing that would make her think he would be ready to help her in any way with her private quest.

As the sky darkened over the landing field, and the spaceport lights came on, glaring down on her smooth metal skin, she pondered all of her choices, and couldn't come up with a clear winner. Alex was the best—but the rest were, for the most part, completely unsuitable. He was obviously absent-minded, and his care for his person left a little to be desired. He wasn't exactly slovenly, but he did not wear his uniform with the air of distinction that Tia felt was required. In fact, on him it didn't look much like a uniform at all, more like a suit of comfortable, casual clothes. For the life of her, she couldn't imagine how he managed *that*.

His tendency to wander down conversational byways could be amusing in a social situation, but she could see where it could also be annoying to, oh, a Vegan, or someone like them. No telling what kind of trouble that could lead to, if they had to deal with AIs, who could be very literal-minded.

No, he wasn't perfect. In fact, he wasn't even close.

"XH One-Oh-Three-Three, you have an incoming transmission," CenCom broke in, disturbing her thoughts. "Hold onto your bustle, lady. It's the Wicked Witch of the West, and I think someone just dropped a house on her sister."

Whatever allusions the CenCom operator was making were lost on Tia, but the sharply impatient tone of her Supervisor was not. "XH One-Oh-Three-Three, have you selected a brawn *yet?*" the woman asked, her voice making it sound as if Tia had been taking weeks to settle on a partner, rather than less than a day.

"Not yet, Supervisor," she replied cautiously. "So far, to be honest, I don't think I've found anyone I can tolerate for truly long stretches of time."

That wasn't exactly the problem, but Beta Gerold y Caspian wouldn't understand the real problem. *She* might just as well be Vegan. She made very few allowances for the human vagaries of brawns, and none at all for shellpersons.

"Hypatia, you're wasting time," Beta said crisply.

"You're sitting here on the pad, doing nothing, taking up a launch-cradle, when you could already be out on courier-supply runs."

"I'm doing my best," Tia responded sharply. "But neither you nor I will be particularly happy if I toss my brawn out after the first run!"

"You've rejected six brawns that all *our* analysis showed were good matches for your personality," Beta countered. "All you'd have to do is compromise a little."

Six of those were matches for me? she thought, aghast. *Which ones? The tofu-personalities? The Valkyrie warrior? Spirits of space help me—Garrison? I thought I was nicer and—more interesting than that!*

But Beta was continuing, her voice taking on the tone of a cross between a policeman and a professorial lecturer. "You know very well that it takes far too long between visits for these Class One digs. It leaves small parties alone for weeks and months at a time. Even when there's an emergency, our ships are so few and so scattered that it takes them days to reach people in trouble—and sometimes an *hour* can make all the difference, let alone a day! We needed you out there the *moment* you were commissioned!"

Tia winced inwardly.

She'd have suspected that Beta went straight for the sore spot deliberately, except that she knew that Beta did not have access to her records. So she didn't know Tia's background. The Agency that oversaw the rights of shellpersons saw to that—to make it difficult for Supervisors to use personal knowledge to manipulate the shellpersons under their control. In the old days, when supervisors had known everything about their shellpersons, they had sometimes deliberately created emotional dependencies in order to assure "loyalty" and fanatical service. It was far, far too easy to manipulate someone whose only contact to the real world was through sensors that could be disconnected.

Still, Beta was right. *If I'd had help earlier, I might not be here right now. I might be in college, getting my Double-Docs like Mum, thinking about what postgraduate work I wanted to do...*

"I'll tell you what," she temporized. "Let me look over the records and the interviews again and sleep on it. One of the things that the Schools told us over and over was to *never* make a choice of brawns feeling rushed or forced." She hardened her voice just a little. "You don't want another Moira, do you?"

"All right," Beta said grudgingly. "But I have to warn you that the supply of brawns is not unlimited. There aren't many more for you to interview in this batch, and if I have to boot you out of here without one, I will. The Institute can't afford to have you sitting on the pad for another six months until the next class graduates."

Go out without a brawn? Alone? The idea had very little appeal. Very little at all. In fact, the idea of six months alone in deep space was frightening. She'd never had to do without *some* human interaction, even on the digs with Mum and Dad.

So while CenCom signed off, she reran her tapes of the interviews, and rescanned information on the twelve

she had rejected. And still could not come up with any-one she *knew*, without a shadow of a doubt, that she'd like to call "friend."

Someone was knocking—quietly—on the closed lift door. Tia, startled out of her brooding, activated the exterior sensors. Who could *that* be? It wasn't even dawn yet!

Her visitor's head jerked up and snapped around alertly to face the camera when he heard it swivel to center on him. The lights from the field were enough for her to "see" by, and she identified him immediately. "Hypatia, it's Alex," he whispered unnecessarily. "Can I talk to you?"

Since she *couldn't* reply to him without alerting the entire area to his clandestine and highly irregular visit, she lowered the lift for him, keeping it darkened. He slipped inside, and she brought him up.

"What are you *doing* here?" she demanded, once he was safely in her central cabin. "This is not appropriate behavior!"

"Hey," he said, "I'm unconventional. I like getting things done in unconventional ways. *The Art of War* says that the best way to win a war is never to do what they expect you to do—"

"I'm sure," she interrupted. "That may be all very well for someone in Military, but this is *not* a war, and I should be reporting you for this," Tia continued, wondering why she wasn't doing just that.

He ignored both the threat and the rebuke. "Your Supervisor said you hadn't picked anyone yet," he said instead. "Why not?"

"Because I haven't," she retorted. "I don't like being rushed into things. Or pressured, either. Sit down."

He sat down rather abruptly, and his expression turned from challenging to wistful. "I didn't think you'd hold my being late against me," he said plaintively. "I thought we hit it off pretty well. When your Supervisor said you'd spent more time with me than any of the other brawns, I thought for sure you'd choose me! What's wrong with me? There must be something! Maybe something I can change!"

"Well—I—" She was so taken aback by his bluntness, and caught unawares by his direct line of questioning that she actually answered him. "I expect my brawns to be punctual—because they have to be precise, and not being punctual implies carelessness," she said. "I thought you looked sloppy, and I don't like sloppiness. You seemed absent-minded, and I had to keep bringing you back to the original subject when we were talking. Both of those imply wavering attention, and that's not good either. I'll be alone out there with my brawn, and I need someone I can depend on to do his job."

"You didn't see me at my best," he pointed out. "I was distracted, and I was thrown completely off-center by the fact that I had messed up by being late. But that isn't all, is it?"

"What do you mean by that?" she asked cautiously.

"It wasn't just that I was . . . less than perfect. You have a secret . . . something you really want to do, that you haven't even told your Supervisor." He eyed the

column speculatively, and she found herself taken completely by surprise by the accuracy of his guess.

His expression turned coaxing. "Come on, Hypatia, you can tell me," he said. "I won't tattle on you. And I might be able to help! You don't know that much about me, just what you got in an hour of talking and what's in the short-file!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said lamely.

"Oh, sure you do. Come on, every brainship wants to buy her contract out—no matter what they say. And every ship has a hobby-horse of her own, too. Barclay secretly wants to chase pirates all over known space like a holo-star, Leta wants to be the next big synthcom composer, even quiet old Jerry wants to buy himself a Singularity drive so he can set interstellar records for speed and distance!" He grinned. "So what's your little hidden secret?"

She only realized that she'd been manipulated when she found herself blurting out her plans for doing some amateur archeological sleuthing on the side, and both the fact that *she* wanted a bit of archeological glory for herself, and that she expected to eventually come up with something worth a fair number of credits toward her buyout. She at least kept back the other wish: the one about finding the bug that had bitten her. By now, the three desires were equally strong, for reading of her parents' success had reawakened all the old dreams of following in Pota's footsteps; dealing with Beta had given her more than enough of being someone else's contract servant; and her studies of brainship chronicles had awakened a new fear—Plague. And what would happen if the bug that paralyzed *her* got loose on a planet-wide scale?

As she tried to cover herself, she inadvertently revealed that the plans were a secret held successfully not only from her CenCom supervisors, but from everyone she'd ever worked with except Moira.

"It was because I thought they'd take my determination as something else entirely," she confessed. "I thought they'd take it as a fixation, and a sign of instability."

All through her confession, Alex stayed ominously silent. When she finished, she suddenly realized that she had just put him in a position to blackmail her into taking him. All he had to do was threaten to reveal her fixation, and she'd be decommissioned and put with a Counselor for the next six months.

But instead of saying anything, he began laughing. Howling with laughter, in fact. She waited in confusion for him to settle down and tell her what was going on.

"You didn't look far enough into my records, lovely lady," he said, calming down and wiping his eyes. "Oh, my. Call up my file, why don't you? Not the Academy file; the one with my application for a scholarship in it."

Puzzled, she linked into the CenCom net and accessed Alex's public records. "Look under 'hobbies,'" he suggested.

And there it was. Hobbies and other interests.

Archeology and Xenology.

She looked further, without invitation, to his class rec-

ords. She soon saw that in lower schools, besides every available history class, he had taken every archeological course he could cram into a school day.

She wished she had hands so that she could rub her temples; as it was, she had to increase her nutrients a tad, to rid herself of a beginning headache.

"See?" he said. "I wouldn't mind my name on a paper or two myself. Provided, of course, that there aren't any curses attached to our findings! And—well, who *couldn't* use a pile of credits? I would very much like to retire from the Service with enough credit to buy myself . . . oh, a small planetoid."

"But—why didn't you apply to the University?" she asked. "Why didn't you go after your degree?"

"Money," he replied succinctly, leaning back in his seat and steeping his fingers over his chest. "Dinero. Cash. Filthy lucre. My family didn't have any—or rather, they had just enough that I didn't qualify for scholarships. Oh, I could have gotten a Bachelor's degree, but those are hardly worth bothering about in Archeology. Heck, Hypatia, *you* know that! You know how long it takes to get *one* Doctorate, too—four years to a Bachelor's, two to a Master's, and *then* years and years and years of field work before you have enough material to do an original dissertation. And a working archeologist, one getting to go out on Class One digs or heading Class Two and Three, can't just have one degree, he has to have a Double-Doc or a Quad-Doc." He shook his head sadly. "I've been an armchair hobbyist for as long as I've been a history buff, dear lady, but that was all I could afford. Books and papers had to suffice for me."

"Then why the Academy?" she asked, sorely puzzled.

"Good question. Has a complicated answer." He licked his lips for a moment, thinking, then continued. "Say I got a Bachelor's in Archeology and History. I *could* have gotten a bottom-of-the-heap clerking job at the Institute with a Bachelor's—but if I did that, I might as well go clerk anywhere else, too. Clerking jobs are all the same wherever you go; only the jargon changes, never the job. But I could have done that, and gotten a work-study program to get a Master's. Then I might have been able to wangle a Research Assistant post to someone, but I'd be doing all of the dull stuff. None of the exploration; certainly none of the puzzle-solving. That would be as far as I could go; an RA job takes too much time to study for a Doctorate. I'd have been locked inside the Institute walls, even if my boss went out on digs himself. Because when you need someone to mind the store at home, you don't hire someone extra, you leave your RA behind."

"Oh, I see why you didn't do that," she replied. "But why the Academy?"

"Standards for scholarships to the Academy are a little different," he told her. "The Scholarship Committees aren't just looking for poor but brilliant people—they're looking for competent people with a particular bent, and if they find someone like that, they do what it takes to get him. And the competition isn't as intense; there are a lot more scholarships available to the Academy than there are to any of the University Archeology and

History Departments I could reach. All two of them; I'd have *bad* to go to a local University; I couldn't afford to go off-planet. Space Academy pays your way to Central; University History scholarships don't include a travel allowance. I figured if I couldn't go dig up old bones on faraway worlds, I'd at least *see* some of those faraway worlds. If I put in for A and E, I'd even get to watch some of the experts at work. And while I was at it, I might as well put in for brawn training and see what it got me. Much to my surprise, my Personality Profile matched what they were looking for, and I actually found myself in brawn training, and once I was out, I asked to be assigned to A and E."

"So, why are you insisting on partnering me?" she asked, deciding that if he had manipulated her, she was going to be blunt with him, and if he couldn't take it, he wasn't cut out to partner her. No matter what he thought. Hmm, maybe frankness could scare him away. . . .

He blinked. "You really don't know? Because you are you," he said. "You have a sparkling personality. You don't try to flatten your voice and sound like an AI, the way some of your classmates have. You aren't at all afraid to have an opinion. You have a teddy bear walled up in your central cabin like a piece of artwork, but you don't talk about it. That's a mystery, and I love mysteries, especially when they imply something as personable as a teddy bear. When you talk, I can hear you smiling, frowning, whatever. You're a *shellperson*, Hypatia, with the emphasis on *person*. I like you. I had hoped that you would like me. I figured we could keep each other entertained for a long, long time."

Well, he'd out-blunted her, that was a fact. And startled her. She was surprised, not a little flattered, and getting to think Alex might not be a bad choice as a brawn after all. "Well, I like you," she replied hesitantly, "but . . ."

"But what?" he asked boldly. "What is it?"

"I don't like being manipulated," she replied. "And you've been doing just that, manipulating me, or trying."

He made a face. "Guilty as charged. Part of it is just something I do without thinking about it. I come from a low-middle-class neighborhood. Where I come from, you either charm your way out of something or fight your way out of it, and I prefer the former. I'll try not to do it again."

"That's not all," she warned. "I've got certain . . . plans . . . that might get in the way, if you don't help me." She paused for effect. "It's about *what* I want to hunt down. The homeworld of the Salomon-Kildaire Entities."

"The EsKays?" he replied, sitting up ramrod-straight. "Oh, my—if this weren't real life I'd think you were telepathic or something! The EsKays are my favorite archeological mystery! I'm *dying* to find out why they'd set up shop, then vanish! And if we could find the homeworld—Hypatia, we'd be *holo-stars!* Stellar achievers!"

Her thoughts milled for a moment. This was strange. Very strange indeed.

"I assume that part of our time Out would be spent checking things out at the EsKay sites?" he said, his eyes warming. "Looking for things the archeologists may not find? Looking for more potential sites?"

"Something like that," she told him. "That's why I need your cooperation. Sometimes I'm going to need a mobile partner on this one."

He nodded knowingly. "Lovely lady, you are looking at him," he replied. "And only too happy to. If there's one thing I'm a sucker for, it's a Quest. And this is even better—a Quest at the service of a lady!"

"A Quest?" She chuckled a little. "What, do you want us to swear to find the Holy Grail now?"

"Why not?" he said lightly. "Here—I'll start." He stood up, faced not her column but Ted E. Bear in his illuminated case, and held his hand as if he were taking the Space Service Oath. "I, Alexander Joli-Chanteu, do solemnly swear that I shall join brainship Hypatia One-Oh-Three-Three in a continuing and ongoing search for the homeworld of the Salomon-Kildaire Entities. I swear that this will be a joint project for as long as we have a joint career. And I swear that I shall give her all the support and friendship she needs in this search, so help me. So let it be witnessed and sealed by yon bear."

Tia would have giggled, except that he looked so very solemn.

"All right," he said, when he sat down again. "What about you?"

What about her? She had virtually accepted him as her brawn, hadn't she? And hadn't he sworn himself into her service, like some kind of medieval knight?

"All right," she replied. "I, Hypatia One-Oh-Three-Three, do solemnly swear to take Alexander Joli-Chanteu into my service, to share with him my search for the EsKay homeworld, and to share with him those rewards both material and immaterial that come our way in this search. I pledge to keep him as my brawn unless we both agree mutually to sever the contract. I swear it by . . . by Theodore Edward Bear."

He grinned, so wide and infectiously that she wished she could return it. "I guess we're a team, then," she said.

"Then here"—he lifted an invisible glass—"is to our joint career. May it be as long and fruitful as the Cades."

He pretended to drink, then to smash the invisible glass in an invisible fireplace, little guessing that Tia's silence was due entirely to frozen shock.

The Cades? How could he—

But before she vocalized anything, she suddenly realized that he could not possibly have known who and what she really was.

The literature on the Cades would never have mentioned their paralyzed daughter, nor the tragedy that caused her paralysis. That simply *Wasn't Done* in academic circles, a world in which only facts and speculations existed, and not sordid details of private lives. The Cades weren't stellar personalities, the kind people made docudramas out of. There was no way he could have known about Hypatia Cade.

Once someone went into the *shellperson* program, their last name was buried in a web of eyes-only and fail-safes, to ensure that their background remained private. It was better that way, easier to adjust to being shelled. An unscrupulous Supervisor could take advantage of a *shellperson's* background for manipulation, and

there were other problems as well. Brainships were, as Professor Brogen had pointed out, valuable commodities. So were their cargoes. The ugly possibilities of using familial hostages or family pressures against a brainship were very real. Or using family ties to lure a ship into ambush. . . .

But there was always the option for a shellperson to tell trusted friends about who he or she was. Trusted friends—and brawns.

She hesitated for a moment, as he saluted Ted. Should she tell him about herself, and avoid a painful gaffe in the future?

No, No, I have to learn to live with it, if I'm going to keep chasing the EsKays. If he doesn't say anything, someone else will. Mum and Dad may have soured on the EsKay project because of me, but their names are still linked with it. And besides—it doesn't matter. The EsKays are mine, now. And I'm not a Cade anymore, even if I do find the homeworld. I won't be listed in the literature as Hypatia Cade, but as Hypatia One-Ob-Three-Three. A brainship. Part of the AH team—

She realized what their team designation looked like. "Do you realize that together our initials are—"

"Ab?" he said, pronouncing it like the word. "Actually, I did, right off. I thought it was a good omen. Not quite EUREKA, but close enough!"

"Hmm," she replied. "It sounds like something a professor says when he thinks you're full of lint but he can't come up with a refutation!"

"You have no romance in your soul," he chided mockingly. "And, speaking of romance, what time is it?"

"Four thirty-two and twenty-seven point five nine seconds," she replied instantly. "In the morning, of course."

"Egads," he said, and shuddered. "Oh-dark-hundred. Let this be the measure of my devotion, my lady. I, who never see the sun rise if I can help it, actually got up at four in the morning to talk to you."

"Devotion, indeed," she replied with a laugh. "All right, Alex—I give in. You are hereby officially my brawn. I'm Tia, by the way, not Hypatia, not to you. But you'd better sneak back to your dormitory and pretend to be surprised when they tell you I picked you, or we'll both be in trouble."

"Your wish, dearest Tia, is my command," he said, rising and bowing. "Hopefully I can get past the gate-guard going out as easily as I got past going in."

"Don't get caught," she warned him. "I can't bail you out, not officially, and not yet. Right now, as my Supervisor told me so succinctly, I am an expensive drain on Institute finances."

He saluted her column and trotted down the stair, ignoring the lift once again.

Well, at least he'll keep in shape.

She watched him as long as she could, but other ships and equipment intervened. It occurred to her then that she could listen in on the spaceport security net for bulletins about an intruder—

She opened the channel, but after a half an hour passed and she had heard nothing, she concluded that he must have made it back safely.

The central cabin seemed very lonely without him. Unlike any of the others—except, perhaps, Chria Chance—he had filled the entire cabin with the sheer force of his personality.

He was certainly lively enough.

She waited until oh-six-hundred, and then opened her line to CenCom. There was a new operator on, one who seemed not at all curious about her or her doings; seemed, in fact, as impersonal as an AI. He brought up Beta's office without so much as a single comment.

As she halfway expected, Beta was present. And the very first words out of the woman's mouth were, "Well? Have you picked a brawn, or am I going to have to trot the rest of the Academy past you?"

Hypatia stopped herself from snapping only by an effort. "I made an *all-night* effort at considering the twelve candidates you presented, Supervisor," she said sharply. "I went to the considerable trouble of accessing records as far back as lower schools."

Only a little fib, she told herself. I did check Alex, after all.

"And?" Beta replied, not at all impressed.

"I have selected Alexander Joli-Chanteu. He can come aboard at any time. I completed all my test-flight sequences yesterday, and I can be ready to lift as soon as CenCom gives me clearance and you log my itinerary." There, she thought smugly. *One in your eye, Madame Supervisor. I'll wager you never thought I'd be that efficient.*

"Very good, AH One-Oh-Three-Three," Beta replied, showing no signs of being impressed at all. "I wouldn't have logged Alexander as brawn if I had been in your shell, though. He isn't as . . . professional as I would like. And his record is rather erratic."

"So are the records of most genius-class intellects, Supervisor," Tia retorted, feeling moved to defend her brawn. "As I am sure you are aware." *And you aren't in my shell, lady*, she thought, with resentment at Beta's superior tone smoldering in her, until she altered the chemical feed to damp it. *I will make my own decisions, and I will thank you to keep that firmly in mind.*

"So they say, AH One-Oh-Three-Three," Beta replied impersonally. "I'll convey your selection to the Academy and have CenCom log in your flight plan and advise you when to be ready to lift immediately."

With that, she logged off. But before Tia could feel slighted or annoyed with her, the CenCom operator came back on.

"AH One-Oh-Three-Three—congratulations!" he said, his formerly impersonal voice warming with friendliness. "I just wanted you to know before we got all tangled up in official things that the operators here all think you picked a fine brawn. Me, especially."

Tia was dumbfounded. "Why—thank you," she managed. "But why—"

The operator chuckled. "Oh, we handle all the cadets' training flights. Some of them are real pains in the orifice—but Alex always has a good word and he never gripes when we have to put him in a holding pattern. And—well, that Donning character tried to get me in trouble over a near-miss when he ignored what I told him and

came in anyway. Alex was in the pattern behind him—he saw and heard it all. He didn't *have* to log a report in my defense, but he did, and it kept me from getting demoted."

"Oh," Tia replied. Now, that was interesting. Witnesses to near-misses weren't required to come forward with logs of the incident—and in fact, no one would have thought badly of Alex if he hadn't. His action might even have earned him some trouble with Donning. . . .

"Anyway, congratulations again. You won't regret your choice," the operator said. "And—stand by for compressed data transmission—"

As her orders and flight plan came over the comlink, Tia felt oddly pleased and justified. Beta did *not* like her choice of brawns. The CenCom operators did.

Good recommendations, both.

She began her preflight check with rising spirits, and it seemed to her that even Ted was smiling. Just a little.

All right, Universe, brace yourself. Here we come!

* * *

"All right, Tia my love, explain what's going on here, in words of one syllable," Alex said plaintively, when Tia got finished with tracing the maze of orders and counter-orders that had interrupted their routine round of deliveries to tiny two- to four-person Exploratory digs. "Who's on first?"

"And what's on second," she replied absent-mindedly. Just before leaving she'd gotten a datahedron on old-Terran phrases and their derivation; toying with the idea of producing that popular-science article. If it got published on enough nets, it might well earn her a tidy little bit of credit . . . and no amount of credit, however small, was to be scorned. But one unexpected side effect of scanning it was that she tended to respond with the punch-lines of jokes so old they were mummified.

Though now, at least, she knew what the CenCom operator had meant by "hang onto your bustle" and that business about the wicked witch who'd had a house dropped on her sister.

"What?" Alex responded, perplexed. "No, never mind. I don't want to know. Just tell me whose orders we're supposed to be following. I got lost back there in the fifth or sixth dispatch."

"I've got it all straight now, and it's dual-duty," she replied. "Institute, with backup from Central, although they were countermanding each other in the first four or five sets of instructions. One of the Excavation digs hasn't been checking in. Went from their regular schedule to nothing, not even a chirp."

"You don't sound worried," Alex pointed out.

"Well, I am, and I'm not," she replied, already calculating the quickest route through hyperspace, and mentally cursing the fact that they didn't have Singularity Drive. But then again, there wasn't a Singularity Point anywhere near where they wanted to go. So the Drive *wasn't* the miracle of instantaneous transportation. Some People claimed it was. *Hmm, and some Brainships too, naming no names.* All very well if there were Singulari-

ty Points littering the stellarscape like stars in the Core, but out here, at this end of the galactic arm, stars were close, but Points were few and far between. One reason why the Institute hadn't opted for a more expensive ship. "If it were an Exploratory dig like my—like we've been trotting supplies and mail to, I would worry a *lot*. They're horribly vulnerable. And an Evaluation dig is just as subject to disaster, since the maximum they can have is twenty people. But a Class Three—Alex, this one had a complement of two hundred! That's more than enough people to hold off any trouble!"

"Class Three Excavation sites get a lot of graduate students, don't they?" Alex said, while she locked things down in her holds for takeoff. Pity the cargo handlers hadn't had time to stow things properly.

"Exactly. They provide most of the coolie labor when there aren't any natives to provide a labor force—that's why the Class Three digs have essentially the same set-up as a military base. Most of the personnel are young, strong, *and* they get the best of the equipment. This one has"—she quickly checked her briefing—"one hundred seventy-eight people between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five. That's plenty to set up perimeter guards."

Alex's fingers raced across the keypads in front of him, calling up data to her screens. "Hmm. No really nasty native beasties. Area declared safe. And—my. Fully armed, are we?" He glanced over at the column. "I had no idea archeologists were such dangerous beings! They never told me that back in secondary school!"

"Grrr," she responded. She flashed a close-up of the bared fangs of a dog on one of the screens he wasn't using. In the past several weeks she and Alex had spent a lot of time talking, getting to know each other. By virtue of her seven years spent mobile, she was a great deal more like a softperson than any of her classmates; and Alex was *fun* to be around. Neither of them particularly minded the standard-issue beiges of her interior; what he had done, during the time spent in FTL, was to copy the minimalist style of his *sensei*'s home, taking a large brush and some pure black and red enamel, and copying one or two Zen ideographs on the walls that seemed barest. She thought they looked very handsome—and quietly elegant.

Of course, his cabin was a mess—but she didn't have to look in there, and she avoided doing so as much as possible.

In turn, he expressed delight over her "sparkling personality." No matter what the Counselors said, she had long ago decided that she had feelings and emotions and had no guilt over showing them to those she trusted. Alex had risen in estimation from Partner to Trusted in the past few weeks; he had a lively sense of humor and enjoyed teasing her. She enjoyed teasing right back.

"Pull in your fangs, wench," he said. "So, what's on the list of Things That Get Well-Armed Archeologists? I have the sinking feeling there were a lot of things they didn't tell me about archeology back in secondary school!"

"Seriously? It's a short list, but a nasty one." She sobered. "Lock yourself in; I'm going to lift, and fast. Things

are likely to rattle around." With drives engaged, she pulled away from her launch cradle, acknowledged Traffic Control and continued her conversation, all at once. "Artifact thieves are high on that list—if you've got a big dig, you can bet that there are things being found that are going to be worth a lot to collectors. They'll come in, blast the base, land, kill everyone left over that gets in their way, grab the loot and lift, all within hours."

Which was why the hidey was so far from our dome, and why Mum and Dad told me to get in it and stay in it if trouble came. "But normally they work an area, and normally they don't show up anywhere where Central has a lot of patrols. There haven't been any thieves in that area, and it is heavily patrolled."

"So—what's next on the list?" Alex asked, one screen dedicated to the stats on the dig, his own hands busy with post-lift chores that some brawns would have left to their brains. Double-checking to make sure all the servos had put themselves away, for instance. Keeping an eye on the weight and balance in the holds. Just another example, she thought happily, of what a good partner he was.

She was clear of the cradle, and about to clear local airspace. Nearing time to accelerate "like a scalded cat." *Now that's a phrase that's still useful.* . . . "Next on the list is something we don't even have to consider, and that's a native uprising."

"Hmm, so I see." His eyes went from the secondary screen where the data on the dig was posted, and back to the primary. "No living native sophonts on the continent. But I can see how it could be the Zulu wars all over again."

He nodded, acknowledging her logic, and she was grateful to *his* self-education in history.

"Precisely," she replied. "Throw enough warm bodies at the barricades, and any defense will go down. In a native uprising, there are generally hordes of fervent fanatics willing to die in the Cause and go straight to Paradise. Accelerating, Alex."

He gave her a thumbs-up, and she threw him into his seat. He merely raised an eyebrow at her column and kept typing. "There must be several different variations on that theme. Let's see—you could have your Desecration of Holy Site uprising, your Theft of Ancient Treasures uprising, your Palace Coup uprising, your Local Peasant Revolution uprising. Uh-huh. I can see it. And when you've overrun the base, it's time to line everyone up as examples of Alien Exploitation. Five executioners, no waiting."

"They normally don't kill except by accident, actually, or in the heat of the moment," she told him. "Most native sophonts are bright enough to realize that two hundred of Central Systems' citizens, a whole herd of their finest minds and their dependents, make a much better bargaining chip as hostages than they do as casualties."

"Not much comfort to those killed in the heat of the moment," he countered. "So, what's the next culprit on the list?"

"Third, last, and most common," she said, a bit grimly, making no effort to control her voice-output. "Disease."

"Whoa, wait a minute—I thought these sites were declared free of hazard!" He stopped typing and paled a little, as well he might. Plague was the bane of the Courier Service existence. More than half the time of every CS ship was spent in ferrying vaccines across known space—and for every disease that was eradicated, three more sprang up out of nowhere. Nor were the brawns immune to the local Plagues that just might choose to start at the moment they landed. "I thought all these sites were sprayed down to a fare-thee-well before they let anyone move in."

"Yes, but that's the one I'm seriously concerned about." *And not just because it was a Bug that got me.* "That, my dear Alex, is what they don't tell you bright-eyed young students when you consider a career in archeology. The number one killer of xeno-archeologists is disease." *And the number one crippler, for that matter.* "Viruses and proto-viruses are sneaky sons-of-singularities; they can hibernate in tombs for centuries, millennia, even in airless conditions." She flashed up some Institute statistics; the kind they didn't show the general public. There was a thirty-percent chance that a xeno-archeologist would be permanently disabled by disease during his career; a twenty-percent chance that he would die. And a one-hundred-percent chance that he would be seriously ill, requiring hospitalization, from something caught on a dig, at some point in his life.

"So the Bug hibernates. Then when the intrepid explorer pops the top off . . ." Alex looked as grim as she felt.

"Right. Gotcha." She laughed, but it had a very flat sound. "Well, sometimes it's been known to be fortuitous. The Cades actually *met* when they were recovering from Henderson's Chorea."

"But mostly it isn't." His voice was as flat as her laugh had been.

"Ye-es. One of my . . . close friends is Doctor Kennet on the *Pride of Albion*. He's gotten to be a specialist in Diseases That Get Archeologists. He's seen a lot of nasty variations over the years—including some really odd opportunistic bugs that are not only short-lived after exposure to air, but require a developing nervous system in order to set up housekeeping."

"Developing—oh, I got it. A kid, or a fetus, provided it could cross the placental barrier." He shivered, and his expression was very troubled. "Brr, that's a really nasty one."

"Verily, White Knight." She decided not to elaborate on it. *Maybe later. To let him know I'm not only out for fortune and glory.* "I just wanted you to be prepared when we got there, which we will in . . . four days, sixteen hours, and thirty-five minutes. Not bad for an old-fashioned FTL drive, I'd say." She'd eliminated the precise measurements that some of the other shellpersons used with their brawns in the first week—except when she was speaking to another shellperson, of course. Alex didn't need that kind of precision, most of the time; when he did, he asked her for it. She had worried at first that she might be getting sloppy.

No, I'm just accommodating myself to his world. I don't

mind. And when he needs precision, he lets me know in advance.

"Well, let me see if I can think of some nonlethal reasons for the dig losing communications." He grinned. "How about 'The dinosaur ate my transmitter'?"

"Cute." Now that their acceleration had smoothed and they were out of the atmosphere, she sent servos snooping into his cabin, as was her habit whenever a week or so went by, and he was at his station, giving her noninvasive access. "Alex, don't you ever pick up your clothes?"

"Sometimes. Not when I'm sent hauling my behind up the stairs with my tail on fire and a directive from CS ordering me to report back to my ship *immediately*." He shrugged, completely unrepentant. "I wouldn't even have changed my clothes if that officious b—"

"Alex," she warned, "I'm recording, I have to. Regulations." Ever since the debacle involving the Nyota Five, *all* central cabin functions were recorded whenever there was a softperson, even if only a brawn, present. That was regulation even on AI drones. The regs had been written for AI drones, in fact; and CS administration had decided that there was no reason to rewrite them for brainships—and every reason why they *shouldn't*. This way no one could claim discrimination.

"If that officious *bully* hadn't insisted I change to uniform before lifting." He shook his head. "As if wearing a uniform was going to make any difference in how well you handled the lift. Which was, as always, excellent."

"Thank you." She debated chiding him on his untidy nature, and decided against it. It hadn't made any difference before, it probably wouldn't now. She just had the servos pick up the tunic and trousers—wincing at the ultra-neon purple that was currently in vogue—and deposited them in the laundry receptacle.

And I'll probably have to put them away when they're clean, too. No wonder they wanted him to change. Hmm. Wonder if I dare "lose" them? Or have a dreadful accident that dyes them a nice sober plum?

That was a thought to tuck away for later. "Getting back to the dinosaur: com equipment breaks, and even a Class Three dig can end up with old equipment. If the only fellow on the dig qualified to fix it happens to be laid up with broken bones—in case you hadn't noticed, archeologists fall down shafts and off cliffs a lot—or double pneumonia . . ."

"Good point." He finished his "housekeeping chores" with a flourish, and settled back in his chair. "Say, Tia, they're all professorial types—do they ever just get so excited they forget to transmit?"

"Brace yourself for FTL—" The transition to FTL was nowhere near as distressing to softpersons as the dive into a Singularity, but it required some warning. Alex gripped the arms of the seat and closed his eyes as she made the jump into hyperspace.

She never experienced more than a brief shiver—*like ducking into a freezing-cold shower*—but Alex always looked a little green during transition. Fortunately, he had no trouble in hyper itself.

And if I can ever afford a Singularity Drive, his records say he takes those transitions pretty well. . . .

Well, right now that was little more than a dream. She picked up the conversation where it had left off. "That has happened on Class One digs and even Class Two, but usually somebody realizes the report hasn't been made after a while when you're dealing with a big dig. Besides, logging reports constitutes publication, and grad students need all the publication they can get. Still, if they just uncovered the equivalent of Tutankhamen's tomb, they *might* all be so excited—and busy documenting finds and putting them into safe storage—that they've forgotten the rest of the universe exists."

He swallowed hard, controlling his nausea. It generally seemed to take his stomach a couple of minutes to settle down. *Maybe the reason it doesn't bite me is because there are no sensory nerves to my stomach anymore. . . .*

But that only brought back unpleasant memories; she ruthlessly shunted the thought aside.

"So . . ." he said finally, as his color began to return. "Tell me why you aren't in a panic because they haven't answered."

"Artifact thieves would probably have been spotted, there aren't any natives to revolt, and disease *usually* takes long enough to set in that *somebody* would have called for help," she said. "And that's why CS wasn't particularly worried, and why they kept countermanding the Institute's orders. But either this expedition has been out of touch for so long that even *they* think there's something wrong, or they've got some information they didn't give us. So we're going in."

"And we find out when we get there," Alex finished, and there wasn't a trace of a smile anywhere on his face.

Tia brought them out of hyper with a deft touch that rattled Alex's insides as little as possible. Once in orbit, she sent down a signal that should activate the team's transmitter if there was anything there to activate. As she had told Alex several days ago, com systems broke. She was fully expecting to get no echo back.

Instead—

You are linked to Excavation Team Que-Zee-Five-Five-Seven. The beacon's automatic response came instantly, in electronic mode. Then came the open carrier wave.

"Alex, I think we have a problem," she said carefully.

"Echo?" He tensed.

"Full echo." She sent the recognition signal that would turn on landing-assistance beacons and alert the AI that there was someone Upstairs—the AI was supposed to open the voice-channel in the absence of humans capable of handling the com. The AI came on-line immediately, transmitting a *ready to receive instructions* signal.

"Worse, they've got full com. I just got the AI go-signal."

She blipped a compressed several megabytes of instructions; give her control of all external and internal recording devices, override any programs installed since the base was established, and give her control of all sensory devices still working.

"Get the AI to give me some pictures," he said, all business. "If it can."

"Coming up—ah, external cam three—this is right outside the mess hall, and—*Oh, shellcrack!*"

"I'll second that," Alex replied, just as grimly.

The camera showed them—somewhat fuzzily—a scene that was anything but a pretty sight.

There were bodies lying in plain view of the camera; from the lack of movement they could not be live bodies. They seemed to be lying where they fell, and there was no sign of violence on them. Tia switched to the next camera the AI offered: a view inside the mess hall. Here, if anything, things were worse. Equipment and furniture lay toppled. More bodies were strewn about the room.

A chill that had nothing to do with the temperature in her shell held her in thrall. Fear, horror, helplessness—

Her own private nightmares—

Tia exerted control over her internal chemistry with an effort; told herself that this could *not* be the disease that had struck her. These people were taken down right where they stood or sat—

She started to switch to another view, when Alex leaned forward suddenly.

"Tia, wait a minute."

Obediently, she held the screen, sharpening the focus as well as the equipment, the four-second lag-to-orbit, and atmospheric interference would allow. She couldn't look at it herself.

"There's no food," he said, finally. "Look—there are plates and things all over the place, but there's not a scrap of food anywhere."

"Scavengers?" she suggested. "Or whatever—"

Whatever killed them? But there are no signs of an invasion, an attack from outside—

He shook his head. "I don't know. Let's try another camera."

This one was outside the supply building—and this was where they found their first survivors.

If that's what you can call them. Tia absorbed the incoming signal, too horrified to turn her attention away. There was a trio of folk within camera range; one adolescent, one young man, and one older woman. They paid no attention to each other, nor to the bodies at their feet, nor to their surroundings. The adolescent sat in the dirt of the compound, stared at a piece of brightly colored scrap paper in front of him, and rocked back and forth. There was no sound pickup on these cameras, so there was no indication that he was doing anything other than rocking in silence, but Tia had the strange impression that he was humming tunelessly.

The young man stood two feet from a fence and shifted his weight back and forth from foot to foot, swaying, as if he wanted to get past the fence and had no idea how. And the older woman paced in an endless circle.

All three of them were filthy, dressed in clothes that were dirt-caked and covered with stains. Their faces were dirt-streaked, eyes vacant; their hair straggled into their eyes in ratty tangles. Tia was just grateful that the cameras were not equipped to transmit odor.

"Tia, get me another camera, please," Alex whispered, after a long moment.

Camera after camera showed the same view; either of bodies lying in the dust, or of bodies and a few survivors,

aimlessly wandering. Only one showed anyone doing anything different; one young woman had found an emergency-ration pouch and torn it open. She was single-mindedly stuffing the ration-cubes into her mouth with both hands, like—

"Like an animal," Alex supplied in a whisper. "She's eating like an animal."

Tia forced herself to be dispassionate. "Not like an animal," she corrected. "At least, not a healthy one." She analyzed the view as if she were dealing with an alien species. "No—she acts like an animal that's been brain-damaged—or maybe a drug addict that's been on something so long there isn't much left of his higher functions."

This wasn't "her" disease. It was something else—deadly—but not what had struck her down. What she felt was not exactly relief, but she was able to detach herself from the situation, to distance herself a little.

You knew, sooner or later, you'd see a Plague. This one is a horror, but you knew this would happen.

"Zombies," Alex whispered, as another of the survivors plodded past without so much as a glance at the woman eating, who had given up eating with her hands and had shoved her face right down into the torn-open ration pouch.

"You've seen too many bad holos," she replied absentmindedly, sending the AI a high-speed string of instructions. She had to find out when this happened—and how long these people had been like this.

It was too bad the cameras weren't set to record, because that would have told her a lot. How quickly the disease—for she was certain it could only be a Plague of some kind—had set in, and what the initial symptoms were. Instead, all she had to go on were the dig's records, and when they had stopped making them.

"Alex, the last recorded entry into the AI's database was at about oh-two-hundred, local time, a week and a half ago," she said. "It was one of the graduate students logging in pottery shards. Then—nothing. No record of illness, nothing in the med records, no one even using a voice-activator to ask the AI for help. The mess hall computer programmed the synthesizer to produce food for a few meals, then something broke the synthesizer."

"One of them," Alex hazarded.

"Probably." She looked for anything else in the database, and found nothing. "That's about all there is. The AI has been keeping things going, but there's been no interaction with it. So forget what I said about diseases taking several days to set in—it looks like this one infected and affected everyone on the base between, oh, sometime during the night and dawn."

If she'd had a head, she would have shaken it. "I can't imagine how something like that could happen to *everyone* at the same time without someone at least blurting a few words to a voice-pickup!"

"Unless . . . Tia, what if they had to be asleep? I mean, there's things that happen during sleep, neurotransmitters—" Alex looked up from the screen, with lines of strain around his eyes. "If they had to be asleep to catch this thing—"

"Or if the first symptom was sleep . . ." She couldn't

help herself; she wanted to shiver with fear. "Alex, I have to set down there. You can't do anything for those people from up here."

"No argument." He strapped himself in. "Okay, lady—get us down as fast as you can. There's one thing I *have* to do, quick, before we lose any more."

She broke orbit with a sudden acceleration that threw him into the back of his seat; he didn't bat an eye. His voice got a little more strained, but that was all.

"I'll have to put on a pressure-suit and get into the supplies; put out food and pans of water. They're starving and dehydrated. Spirits of space only know what they've been eating and drinking all this time—could be a lot of them died of dysentery, or from eating or drinking something that wasn't food." He was thinking out loud; waiting for Tia to put in her own thoughts, or warn him if he was planning to do something really stupid. "No matter what else we do, I *have* to do that."

"Open up emergency ration bags and leave pans of the cubes all over the compound," she suggested, as her outer skin heated up to a glowing red as she hit the upper atmosphere. "Do the same with the water. Like you were feeding animals."

"I am feeding animals," he said, and his voice and face were bleak. "I have to keep telling myself that. Or I'll do something really, really stupid. You get a line established to Kleinman Base, ASAP."

"Already in the works." A comlink that far wasn't the easiest thing to establish and hold—

But that was why she was a brainship, not an AI drone.

"Hang on," she said as she hit the first of the turbulence. "It's going to be a bumpy burn down!"

The camera and external mike on Alex's helmet gave her a much clearer view of the survivors than Tia really wanted. Of the complement of two hundred at this base, no more than fifty survived, most of them between the ages of fifteen and thirty.

They avoided Alex entirely, hiding whenever they saw him—but they came out to huddle around the pans of food and water he put out, stuffing food into their faces with both hands. Alex had gotten three of the bodies he'd found in their beds into the medcenter, and the diagnosis was the same in all three cases: complete systemic collapse, which might have been stroke. The rest—the ones that had not simply dropped in their tracks—had died of dysentery and dehydration. Of the casualties, it looked as if half of the dead had keeled over with this collapse, all of them the oldest members of the team.

After the third, Alex called a halt to it; instead he loaded the bodies into the base freezer. Someone else would have to come get them and deal with them. Tia had recorded his efforts, but could not bring herself to actually watch the incoming video.

He completed his grisly work, and returned to caring for the living. "Tia, as near as I can guess, this thing hits people in one of two ways. Either you get a stroke or something and die, or you turn into . . . that." She saw whatever he was looking at by virtue of the fact that the helmet-camera was mounted right over his forehead.

And "that" was something that had once been a human boy, scrambling away out of sight.

"That seems like a good enough assumption for now," she agreed. "Can you tell what happened with the food situation? Are they so . . . far gone that they can't remember how to get into basic supplies?"

"That's about it," he agreed wearily. "Believe it or not, they can't even remember how to pop ration packs—they seem to have a vague memory of where the food was stored, but they never even tried to open the door to the supply warehouse." He trudged across the compound to one of the pans he had set out. It was already empty, without even crumbs. He poured ration-cubes into it from a bag he carried under his arm. She caught furtive movement at the edge of the camera view; presumably the survivors were waiting for him to go away so that they could empty the pan again. "When they found the emergency pouches they tore them open, like that woman we watched. But a lot of times, they don't even seem to realize that the pouch has food in it."

"There are two kinds of victims; the first lot, who got hit and died in their sleep or on the way to breakfast," he continued, making his way to the next pan. "Then the rest of them died of dehydration and dysentery because they were eating half-rotten food."

"Those would go hand in hand here," she replied. "With nothing to stop the liquid loss through dysentery, dehydration comes on pretty quickly."

"That's what I figured." He paused to fill another pan. "There'd be more of them dead, of exposure and hypothermia, except that the temperature doesn't drop below twenty Celsius at night or get above thirty in the daytime. Shirtsleeve weather. Tia—see when this balmy weather pattern started, would you?"

"Right." He must have had an idea—and it didn't take her more than a moment to interrogate the AI. "About a week before the last contact. Does that sound as suspicious to you as it does to me?"

"Yeah. Maybe something hatched." Alex scanned the area for her, and she noted that there were a fair number of insects in the air.

But native insects wouldn't bite humans—or would they? "Or sprouted—this could be a violent allergic reaction, or some other kind of interaction with a mold spore or pollen." Farfetched, but not entirely impossible.

"But why wouldn't the Class One team have uncoved it?" he countered, filling another pan with ration-cubes. "Kibble," the brawns called it. The basic foodstuff of the Central System worlds; the monotonous ration-bars handed out by the PTA to client-planets cut up into bite-sized pieces. Tia had never eaten it; her parents had always insisted on real meals. But she had been told that while it looked, smelled, and tasted reasonable, its sameness would drive you over the edge if you had to eat it for very long. But every base had pouches of the stuff cached all over, and huge bags stockpiled in the warehouse, in case something happened to the food synthesizers.

Those pouches must have been what kept the survivors going—until they ran out of pouches that were easy to find.

The dig records were, fortunately, quite clear. "Got the answer to your question—Class One dig was here for winter, only—they found what they needed to upgrade to Class Three within a couple of days of digging. They really hit a big find in the first test-trench, and the Institute pushed the upgrade through to take advantage of the good weather coming."

"And initial Survey teams don't *live* here, they live on their ships." Alex had a little more life in his voice.

"They were only here in the fall," she said. "There's never been a human here during spring and summer."

"Tia, you put that together with an onset of this thing after dark, and what do you get?"

"An insect vector?" she hazarded. "Nocturnal? I must admit that the pattern for venomous and biting insects is to appear after sunset."

"Sounds right to me. As soon as I get done filling the pans again, I'm going to go grab some bedding from one of the victims' beds, seal it in a crate, and freeze it. Maybe it's something like a flea. Can you see if there's anything in the AI med records about a rash of insect bites?"

"Can do," she responded, glad to finally have something, *anything*, concrete to do.

The sun was near the horizon when Alex finished boxing his selection of bedding and sealing it in a freezer container. He came back out again after loading the container into one of Tia's empty holds. She saw to the sealing of the hold, while he went back out to try to catch one of the Zombies—the name he had tagged the survivors with, over her protests.

She finally established the comlink while he was still out in the compound, fruitlessly chasing one after another of the survivors and getting nowhere. He was weighted down by his pressure-suit; they were weighted down by nothing at all, and had the impetus of fear. He seemed to terrify them, and they did not connect the arrival of food in the pans with him, for some reason.

"They act like I'm some kind of monster," he panted, leaning over to brace himself on his knees while he caught his breath. "Since they don't have that reaction to each other, it has to be this suit that they're afraid of. Maybe I should—"

"*Stay in the suit*," she said fiercely. "You make one move to take that suit off, and I'll sleepygas you!"

"Oh, Tia . . ." he protested.

"I'm not joking." She continued her conversation with the Base brain in rapid, highly compressed databursts with *horribly* long pauses for the information to transmit across hyperspace. "You stay in that suit! We don't know what caused all this—"

Her tirade was interrupted by a dreadful howling and the external camera bounced as Alex moved violently. At first she thought that something awful had happened to Alex—but then she realized that the sound came from his *external* suit-mike, and that the movement of the camera had been caused by his own violent start of surprise.

"*What the—*" he blurted, then recovered. "Hang on, Tia. I need to see what this is, but it doesn't sound like an attack or anything."

"Be careful," she urged fearfully. "Please—"

But he showed no signs of foolhardy bravery; in fact, as the howling continued under the scarlet light of the descending sun, he sprinted from one bit of cover to another like a seasoned guerrilla fighter.

"Fifty meters," Tia warned, taking her measurement from the strength of the howls. "They have to be on the other side of this building."

"Thanks." He literally crept on all fours to the edge of the building, and peeked around the corner.

Tia saw exactly what he did, so she understood his sharp intake of breath.

She couldn't count them, for they milled about too much, but she had the impression that every survivor in the compound had crowded into the corner of the fence nearest the sunset. Those right at the fence clung to it as they howled their despair to the sun; the rest clung to the backs of those in front of them and did the same.

Their faces were contorted with the first emotion Tia had seen them display.

Fear.

"They're scared, Tia," Alex whispered, his voice thick with emotions that Tia couldn't decipher. "They're afraid. I think they're afraid that the sun isn't going to come back."

That might have been the case—but Tia couldn't help but wonder if their fear was due to something else entirely. Could they have a dim memory that something *terrible* had happened to them in the hours of darkness, something that took away their friends and changed their lives into a living hell? Was that why they howled and sobbed with fear?

When the last of the light had gone, they fell suddenly silent—then, like scurrying insects, they dropped to all fours and scuttled away, into whatever each, in the darkness of his or her mind, deemed to be shelter. In a moment, they were gone. All of them.

There was a strangled sob from Alex. And Tia shook within her shell, racked by too many emotions to effectively sort out.

"You have two problems."

Tia knew the name to put to the feeling she got when her next transmission from the Base was not from some anonymous CS doctor, but from Doctor Kenny.

Relief. Real, honest, relief.

It flooded her, making her relax, clearing her mind. Although she could not speak directly with him, if there was *anyone* who could help them pull this off, it would be Doctor Kenny. She settled all of her concentration on the incoming transmission.

"You'll have to catch the survivors and keep them alive—and you'll have to keep them from contaminating your brawn. After that, we can deal with symptoms and the rest."

All right, that made sense.

"We went at this analyzing your subjects' behavior. You were right in saying that they act in a very similar fashion to brain-damaged simians."

This was an audio-only transmission; the video por-

tion of the signal was being used to carry a wealth of technical data. Tia wished she could see Doctor Kenny's face—but she heard the warmth and encouragement in his voice with no problem.

"We've compiled all the data available on *any* experiments where the subjects' behavior matched your survivors," Doctor Kenny continued. "Scan it and see if anything is relevant. Tia, I can't stress this enough—no matter *what* you think caused this disease, *don't let Alex get out of that suit*. I can't possibly say this too many times. Now that he's gone out there, he's got a contaminated surface. I want you to ask him to stay in the suit, sleep in the suit, eat through the suit ports, use the suit facilities. I would prefer that he stayed out in the compound or in your airlock even to sleep—every time he goes in and out of the suit, in and out of your lock, we have a chance for decontamination to fail. I know you understand me."

Only too well, she thought grimly, remembering all that time in isolation.

"Now, we've come up with a general plan for you," Doctor Kenny continued. "We don't think that you'll be able to catch the survivors, given the way they're avoiding Alex. So you're going to have to trap them. My experts think you'll be able to rig drop-traps for them, using packing crates with field generators across the front and rations for bait. The technical specs are on the video-track, but I think you have the general idea. The big thing will be not to frighten the rest each time you trap one."

Doctor Kenny's voice echoed hollowly in the empty cabin; she damped the sound so that it didn't sound so lonely.

"We want one, two at most, per crate. We're afraid that, bunched together, they might hurt each other, fight over food—they're damaged, and we just don't know how aggressive they might get. That's why we want you to pack them in the hold in the crates. Once you get them trapped, we want you to put enough food and water in each crate to last the four days to base—and Tia, at that point, leave them there. Don't do anything with them. Leave them alone. I trust you to exercise your good sense and not give in to any temptation to intervene in their condition."

Doctor Kenny sighed gustily. "We bandied around the idea of tranking them—but they *have* to eat and drink; four days knocked out might kill them. You don't have the facilities to cold-sleep fifty people. So—box them, hope the box matches their idea of a good place to hide, leave them with food and water and shove them in the hold. That's it for now, Tia. Transmit everything you have, and we'll have answers for you as soon as we're able. These double-bounce comlinks aren't as fast as we'd like, but they beat the alternative. Our thoughts are with you."

The transmission ended, leaving her only with the carrier wave.

Now what? Give Alex the bad news, I guess. And calculate how many packing crates I can pack into my holds.

"Alex?" she called. "Are you having any luck tracking down where the survivors are?"

"I've turned on all the exterior lights," Alex said, "I hoped that I'd be able to lure some of them out into the open, but it's no good." She activated his helmet-camera, and watched his gloved hand typing override orders into the keyboard of the main AI console. Override orders had to be put in by hand, with a specific set of override codes, no matter how minor the change was—that was to keep someone from taking over an AI with a shout or two. "Right now I'm giving myself full access to everything—I may not need it, but who knows?"

"I've got our first set of orders," she told him. "Do you want to hear them?"

"Sure." Typing in a pressure-suit was no easy task, and Tia did not envy him. It took incredible patience to manage a normal keyboard in those stiff gloves.

She retransmitted Doctor Kenny's message, and waited patiently for his response when she finished.

"So I have to stay in the suit." He sighed. "Oh, well. It could be worse, I suppose. It could be two weeks to Base, instead of four days." He typed the last few characters with a flourish, and was rewarded by the "Full Access, Voice Commands accepted" legend. "No choice, right? Look, Tia, I know you're going to be lonely, but if I have to stay in this suit, I might just as well sleep out here."

"But," she protested, "what if they decide you're an enemy or something?"

"What, the Zombies?" He snorted. "Tia, right now they're all crammed into some of the darnedest nooks and crannies you ever saw in your life. I couldn't pry them out of there with a forklift. I know where they all are, but I'd have to break bones to get them. *Their* bones. They're terrified, even with all the floodlights on. No, they aren't going to come after me in the dark."

"All right," she agreed reluctantly. She knew he was right; he'd be much more comfortable out there—there was certainly more room available to him there.

"I'll be closer to the Zombies," he said wearily. "And I can barricade myself in one of the offices, get enough bedding from stores to make a reasonable nest. I'll plug the suit in to keep everything charged up, and you can monitor the mike and camera. I snore."

"I know," she said, in a weak attempt to tease him.

"You would." He turned, and the camera tracked what he was seeing. "Look, I'm here in the Site Supervisor's office. There's even a real nice couch in here and—" He leaned down and fiddled with the underside of the piece of furniture. "Ah-hah. As I thought. There's a real bed in the couch. Bet the old man liked to sneak naps. Look—" He panned around the office. "No windows. One door. A full-access terminal. I'll be fine."

"All right, I believe you." She thought, quickly. "I'll look over those plans for traps and transmit them to the AI, and I'll find out where everything you'll need is stored. You can start collecting the team tomorrow."

What's left of them, she thought sadly. *What isn't already stored in the freezer.*

"See what you can do about adding some sleepygas to

the equation," he suggested, yawning under his breath. "If we can knock them out once they're in the boxes, rather than trapping them with field generators, that should solve the problem of frightening the others."

That was a good suggestion. A much better one than Doctor Kenny's. *If she had enough gas. . . .*

But wait; this was a fully stocked station. There might be another option. Crime *did* exist wherever there were people, and mental breakdowns—sometimes it was necessary to immobilize someone for his protection and the protection of others.

She interrogated the AI, and discovered that indeed, there were several special low-power needlers in the arms locker. And with them, full clips of anesthetic needles.

"Alex," she said slowly, "how good a shot are you?"

"When this is over, I'm requisitioning an ethological tagging kit," she said fiercely, as Alex crouched on the roof of the mess hall and waited for his subject's hunger to overcome her timidity. She hesitated, just in front of the crate—she smelled the food, and she wanted it, but she was afraid to go inside after it. She swayed from side to side, like one of the first three survivors they'd seen; that swaying seemed to be the outward sign of inner conflict.

"Why?" he asked. The woman stopped swaying, and was creeping, cautiously, into the crate. Alex wanted her to be all the way inside before he darted her, both to prevent the rest from seeing her collapse, and to avoid having to haul her about and perhaps hurt her.

"Because they have full biomonitor contact-buttons in them," she replied. "Skin-adhesive ones. They're normally put inside ears, or on a shaved patch."

After a bit more consultation with Kleinman Base and Doctor Kenny, darting the survivors had been given full approval—and since they were going to be out, a modification in the setup had been arranged. There would be shredded paper bedding in the crates as well as food and water—and each victim would wear a contact-button glued to the spine between the shoulder blades with surgical adhesive. With judicious reprogramming, a minimal amount of medical information could come from that—heart rate, respiration, skin temperature. Tia had reprogrammed the buttons; now it was her brawn's turn to live up to his title.

"I sure never thought my marksmanship would ever be an asset," he said absently. The woman had only a foot or so to go. . . .

"I never thought I was going to be packing my hold with canned archeologists." The packing crates would fit—but only if they were stacked two deep. Alex had already set up the site's machine-shop servos to drill air-holes in all the crates, and there would be an unbreakable bioluminescent light-stick in each. They were rated for a week of use. Hopefully that much light would be enough to keep them from panicking.

"That's a good girl," Alex crooned to the reluctant Zombie. "Good girl. Smell the nice food? It's really good food. You're hungry, aren't you?" The woman took the last few steps in a rush, and fell on the dish of ration-cubes. Alex darted her in the same moment.

The trunk took effect within seconds, and she didn't even seem to realize that she'd been struck. She simply dropped over on her side, asleep.

Alex left the needler up on the roof, where he had rigged a sniper post with a tripod to hold the gun steady. He trotted down the access steps to the first floor and hurried to get out where he could be seen before someone else smelled the food and came after it. As he burst out into the dusty courtyard, a hint of movement at the edge of the camera field told Tia there *was* another Zombie lurking out there.

After many protests, she had begun calling the survivors "Zombies" too—it helped to think of them as something other than humans. She admitted to Doctor Kenny that without that distancing, it was hard to keep working without strong feelings getting in the way of efficiency.

"That's all right, Tia," he soothed on his next transmission. "Even I have to stop thinking of my patients as people and start thinking of them as 'cases' or 'case studies' sometimes. That's the nature of this business, and we'll both do what we have to in order to get as many of these people back alive as we can."

She would have liked to ask him if he'd ever thought of *her* as a "case study," but she knew, in her heart of hearts, that he probably had. But then, look what he had done for her. . . .

No, calling these poor people "Zombies" wasn't going to hurt them, and it would keep her concentrating on what to do for them, and not on *them*.

Alex had been boxing Zombies all morning, and now he had it down to a system. Wheeling out of the warehouse, under the control of the AI, came a small parade of servos laden with the supplies that would keep the woman—hopefully—alive and healthy in her crate for the next five or six days. A bag of finely shredded paper, to make a thick nest on the bottom of the box. A whole bag of ration-cubes. A big squeeze-bottle of water. A tiny chemical toilet, on the off chance she *might* remember how to use it. The bioluminescent light-stick. Inside of fifteen minutes, Alex had his setup. The big bottle of water was strapped to one wall, the straps glue-bonded in place, the bottle bonded to the straps. The toilet was bonded to the floor in the corner of the six foot by six foot crate. The bag of ration-cubes was opened at the top, and strapped and bonded into the opposite corner. Paper was laid in a soft bed over the entire floor, and the unconscious woman rolled onto it, with the contact-button glued to her back. Lastly, the bioluminescent tube was activated and glue-bonded to the roof of the crate, the side brought up and fastened in place, and the crate was ready for the loader.

That was Tia's job; she brought the servo-forklift in from the warehouse under her control rather than the AI's. Alex did not trust the AI to have the fine control that Tia did. The lift bore the now-anonymous crate up her ramp. She stored it with the rest, piled not two but three high and locked in place. Each crate was eight inches from the ones next to it, to allow for ventilation on four sides. There were twelve crates in the hold now. They hoped to have twelve more before nightfall. If all went well.

Thirty minutes for each capture. . . .

They couldn't have done it if not for Tia's multitasking abilities, and all the servos under her control. Right now, a set of servos were setting up crates all over the compound, near the hiding places of the Zombies. The Zombies seemed just as frightened of the servos as they were of Alex in his suit. By running the servos all over the compound, they managed to send every one of the Zombies into hiding. They ran servos around each hiding place until they were ready to move to that area for darting and capture. By now, the Zombies were getting hungry, which was all to the good, so far as Alex and Tia were concerned. One trap was being baited now—and Alex was on his way to the hidden sniper position above it. Meanwhile, the rest of the servos were patrolling the compound *except* in the area of that baited crate, keeping the Zombies pinned down.

A second hair-raising moment had occurred at dawn, bringing Alex up out of his bed with a scream of his own. The Zombies had gathered to greet the rising sun with another chorus of howls, although this time they seemed more—well, not joyous, but certainly there was no fear in the Zombie faces.

Once the first servo appeared and frightened the Zombies into hiding again, the final key to their capture-plan was in place.

They would catch as many of the Zombies as possible during the daylight hours. Alex had marked their favorite hiding places last night, and by now the patrolling servos had those that were not occupied blocked off. More crates would be left very near those blocked-off hiding-holes. Would they be attractive enough for more of the Zombies to hide in them? Alex thought so. Tia hoped he was right—for every Zombie cowering in a crate meant one more they could dart and pack up, one more they would not have to catch tomorrow.

One less half-hour spent here. If they could keep up the pace—if the Zombies didn't get harder to catch.

Alex kept up a running dialogue with her, and she sensed that he was as frightened and lonely as she was, but was determined not to show it. He revealed a lot, over the course of the day; she built up a mental picture of a young man who had been just different enough that while he was popular, he had few close friends. The only one whom he really spoke about was someone called Jon—the chess and games player he had mentioned before. He spent a lot of time with Jon, who had helped him with his lessons when he was younger, so Tia assumed that Jon must have been older than Alex.

Older or not, Jon had been, and still was, a *friend*. There was no mistaking the warmth in Alex's voice when he talked about Jon; no mistaking the pleasure he felt when he talked about the message of congratulation Jon had sent when he graduated from the Academy—

Or the laughter he'd gotten from the set of "brawn jokes" Jon had sent when Tia picked Alex as her partner.

Well, Doctor Kenny, Anna, and Lars were my friends—and still are. Sometimes age doesn't make much of a difference.

"Hey, Alex?" she called. He was waiting for another

of the timid Zombies to give in to hunger. The clock was running.

"What?"

"What do you call a brawn who can count past ten?"

"I don't know," he said good-naturedly. "What?"

"Barefoot."

He made a rude noise, then sighted and pulled the trigger. One down, how many more to go?

They had fifty-two Zombies packed in the hold, and one casualty. One of the Zombies had not survived the darting; Alex had gone into acute depression over that death, and it had taken Tia more than an hour to talk him out of it. She didn't dare tell him then what the contact-buttons revealed; some of their passengers weren't thriving well. The heart rates were up, probably with fear, and she heard whimpering and wailing in the hold whenever there was no one else in it but the Zombies. The moment any of the servos or Alex entered the hold, they went utterly silent. Out of fear, Tia suspected.

The last Zombie was in the hold; the hold was sealed, and Tia had brought the temperature up to skin-heat. The ventilators were at full strength. Alex had just entered the main cabin.

And he was reaching for his helmet release.

"*Don't crack your suit,*" she snapped. How could she have forgotten to tell him? Had she? Or had she told him, and he had forgotten?

"What?" he said. Then, "Oh, *decom* it. I forgot."

She restrained herself from saying what she wanted to. "Doctor Kenny said you have to stay in the suit. Remember? He thinks that the chance we might have missed something in decontamination is too much to discount. He doesn't want you to crack your suit until you're at the Base. All right?"

"What if something goes wrong for the Zombies?" he asked quietly. "Tia, there isn't enough room in that hold for me to climb around in the suit."

"We'll worry about that if it happens," she replied firmly. "Right now, the important thing is for you to get strapped down, because *their* best chance is to get to Base as quickly as possible, and I'm going to leave scorches marks on the ozone layer getting there."

He took the unsable hint and strapped himself in; Tia was better than her word, making a tail-standing takeoff and squirting out of the atmosphere with a blithe disregard for fuel consumption. The Zombies were going to have to deal with the constant acceleration to hyper as best they could—at least she knew they were all sitting or lying down, because the crates simply weren't big enough for them to stand.

She had been relaying symptoms—observed and recorded—back to Doctor Kenny and the med staff at Kleinman Base all along. She had known they weren't going to get a lot of answers, but every bit of data was valuable, and getting it there ahead of the victims was a plus.

But now that they were on the way, they were on their own, without the resources of the abandoned dig or the Base they were en route to. The med staff might

have answers—but *they* likely would not have the equipment to implement them.

Alex couldn't move while she was accelerating, but once they made the jump to FTL, he unsnapped his restraints and headed for the stairs.

"Where are you going?" she asked nervously.

"The hold. I'm in my suit—there's nothing down there that can get me through the suit."

Tia listened to the moans and cries through her hold pickups; thought about the contact-buttons that showed fluttering hearts and unsteady breathing. She knew what would happen if he got down there.

"You can't do anything for them in the crates," she said. "You know that."

He turned toward her column. "What are you hiding from me?"

"N-nothing," she said. But she didn't say it firmly enough.

He turned around and flung himself back in his chair, hands speeding across the keyboard with agility caused by days of living in the suit. Within seconds he had called up every contact-button and had them displayed in rows across the screen.

"Tia, what's going on down there?" he demanded.

"They weren't like this before we took off, were they?"

"I think—" She hesitated. "Alex, I'm not a doctor!"

"You've got a medical library. You've been talking to the doctors. *What* do you think?"

"I think—they aren't taking hyper well. Some of the data the Base sent me on brain-damaged simians suggested that some kinds of damage did something to the parts of the brain that make you compensate for . . . for things that you know should be there, but aren't. Where you can see a whole letter out of just parts of it—identify things from split-second glimpses. Kind of like maintaining a mental balance. Anyway, when that's out of commission . . ." She felt horribly helpless. "I think for them it's like being in Singularity."

"For *four days*?" he shouted, hurting her sensors. "I'm going down there—"

"And do what?" she snapped back. "What are you going to do for them? They're afraid of you in that suit!"

"Then I'll—"

"You do, and I'll gas the ship," she said instantly. "I mean that, Alex! You put *one finger* on a release and I'll gas the whole ship!"

He sat back down, collapsing into his chair. "What can we do?" he said weakly. "There has to be something."

"We've got some medical supplies," she pointed out. "A couple of them can be adapted to add to the air supply down there. *Help* me, Alex. Help me find something we can do for them. Without you cracking your suit."

"I'll try," he said unhappily. But his fingers were already on the keyboard, typing in commands to the med library, and not sneaking toward his suit-releases. She blanked for a microsecond with relief—

Then went to work.

Three more times there were signs of crisis in the hold. Each time she had to threaten him to keep him from

diving in and trying to save one of the Zombies by risking his own life. They lost one more, to a combination of antiviral agent and watered-down sleepgas that they *hoped* would act as a tranquilizer rather than an anesthetic. Zombie number twenty-seven might have been allergic to one or the other, although there was no such indication in his med records; his contact-button gave all the symptoms of allergic shock before he died.

Alex stopped talking to her for four hours after that. Twenty-seven had been in the bottom rank; a shot of adrenaline would have brought him out—if it had been allergic shock. But his crate was buried deep in the stacks, and Alex would have had to peel the whole suit off to get to him. Which Tia wouldn't permit. They had no way of knowing if this was really an allergic reaction, or if it was another development of the Zombie Bug. Twenty-seven had been an older man, showing some of the worst symptoms.

Although Alex wasn't talking to her, Tia kept talking at him, until he finally gave in. Just as well. His silence had her convinced that he was going to ask for a transfer, and that he hated her—if a shellperson could be in tears, she was near that state when he finally answered.

"You're right," was all he said. "Tia, you were right. There are fifty more people there depending on both of us, and if I got sick, that's the mobile half of the team out." And sighed. But it was enough. Things went back to normal for them. Just in time for the transition to Norm Space.

Kleinman Base kept them in orbit, sending a full decontamination team to fetch Alex as well as the Zombies, leaving Tia all alone for about an hour. It was a very lonely hour. . . .

But then another decontamination team came aboard, and when they left again, two days later, there was nothing left of her original fittings. She had been fogged, gassed, stripped, polished, and refitted in that time. All that was left—besides the electronic components—were the ideographs painted on the walls. It still looked the same, however, because everything was replaced with the same standard-issue, psychologically approved beige. . . .

Only then was she permitted to de-orbit and land at Kleinman Base so that the decontamination team could leave.

No sooner had the decontamination team left when there was a welcome hail at the airlock.

"Tia! Permission to come aboard, ma'am!"

She activated her lock so quickly that it must have flown open in his face, and brought him up in the lift rather than waiting for him to climb the stairs. He sauntered in sans pressure-suit, a gave her column a jaunty salute, and put down his bags.

"I have good news and better news," he said, flinging himself into his chair. "Which do you want to hear first?"

"The good news," she replied promptly, and did *not* scold him for putting his feet up on the console.

"The good news is all personal. I have been granted a clean bill of health, and so have you. In addition, since

the decontamination team so rudely destroyed my clothing and anything else that they couldn't be sure of, I have just been having a glorious spending-spree down there at the Base, using a CS unlimited credit account!"

Tia groaned, picturing more neon-purple, or worse. "Don't open the bags, or they'll think I've had a radiation leak."

He mock-pouted. "My dear lady, your taste is somewhere back in the last decade."

"Never mind my taste," she said. "What's the better news?"

"Our patients are on their way to full recovery." At her exclamation, he held up a cautionary hand. "It's going to take them several months, maybe even a year. Here's the story—and the reason why they stripped you of everything that could be considered a fabric. Access your Terran entomology, if you would. Call up something called a 'dust mite' and another something called a 'sand flea.'"

Puzzled, she did so, laying the pictures side by side on the central screen.

"As we guessed, this was indeed a virus, with an insect vector. The culprit was something like a sand flea, which, you will note, has a taste for warm-blooded critters. But it was about the size of a dust mite. The fardling things don't hatch until the temperature is right, the days are long enough, and there's been a rainstorm. Once they hatch, the only thing that kills them is really intense insecticide or freezing cold for several weeks. They live in the dust, like sand fleas. Those archeologists had been tracking in dust ever since the rainstorm, and since there'd been no sign of any problems, they hadn't been very careful about their decontamination protocols. The bugs all hatched within a hour, or so the entomologists think. They bit everything in sight, since they always wake up hungry. *But*—here's the catch—since they were so small, they didn't leave a bite mark, so there was nothing to show that anyone had been bitten." He nodded at the screen. "Every one of the little beggars carries the virus. It's like *e. coli* in their guts."

"I assume that everyone got bitten about the same time?" she hazarded.

"Exactly," he said. "Which meant that everyone came down with the virus within hours of each other. Mostly, purely by coincidence, in their sleep. The virus itself invokes allergic shock in most people it infects. Which can look a lot like a stroke, under the right circumstances."

"So we didn't—" she stopped herself before she went any further, but he finished the statement for her.

"No, we didn't kill anyone. It was the Zombie Bug. And the best news of all is that the Zombie state is caused by interference with the production of neurotransmitters. Clean out the virus, and eventually everyone gets back to normal."

"Oh, *Alex*—" she said, and he interrupted her.

"A little more excellent news—first, that we get a bonus for this one. And second, my very dear, you saved my life."

"I did?" she replied, dumbfounded.

"If I had cracked my suit even once, the bugs would have gotten in. They were everywhere, in your carpet, the upholstery; either they got in the first time we cracked the lock or the standard decontamination didn't wash them all off the suit, or kill them. And I am one of those seventy-five percent of the population so violently allergic to them that . . ." He let her fill in the rest.

"*Alex*—I'd rather have you as my brawn than all the bonuses in the world," she said, after a long pause.

"Good," he said, rising and patting her column gently. "I feel the same way."

Before the moment could get maudlin, he cleared his throat and continued. "Now the bad news; we're so far behind on our deliveries that they want us out of here yesterday. So, are you ready to fly, bright lady?"

She laughed. "Strap on your chair, hotshot. Let's show 'em how to burn on out of here!"

To be continued

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If you like what you've seen in this issue of AMAZING® Stories, there's more where it came from. We have a small selection of back issues dating from the 1960s and 1970s, plus every magazine from May 1990 through June 1992, available for purchase by mail order. The list on this page and the facing page mentions every magazine that's for sale, and gives a few of the stories you'll find in each one.

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Fantasies by Michael Swanwick and Tim Sullivan; *Plague Ship* by R. Garcia y Robertson; *The Number of the Sand* by George Zebrowski; *The Face of the Waters* by Robert Silverberg

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Death Link by Gene DeWeese and L. A. Taylor; *The Storming Bone* by Ian McDowell; *Thomas and the Wise Men* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

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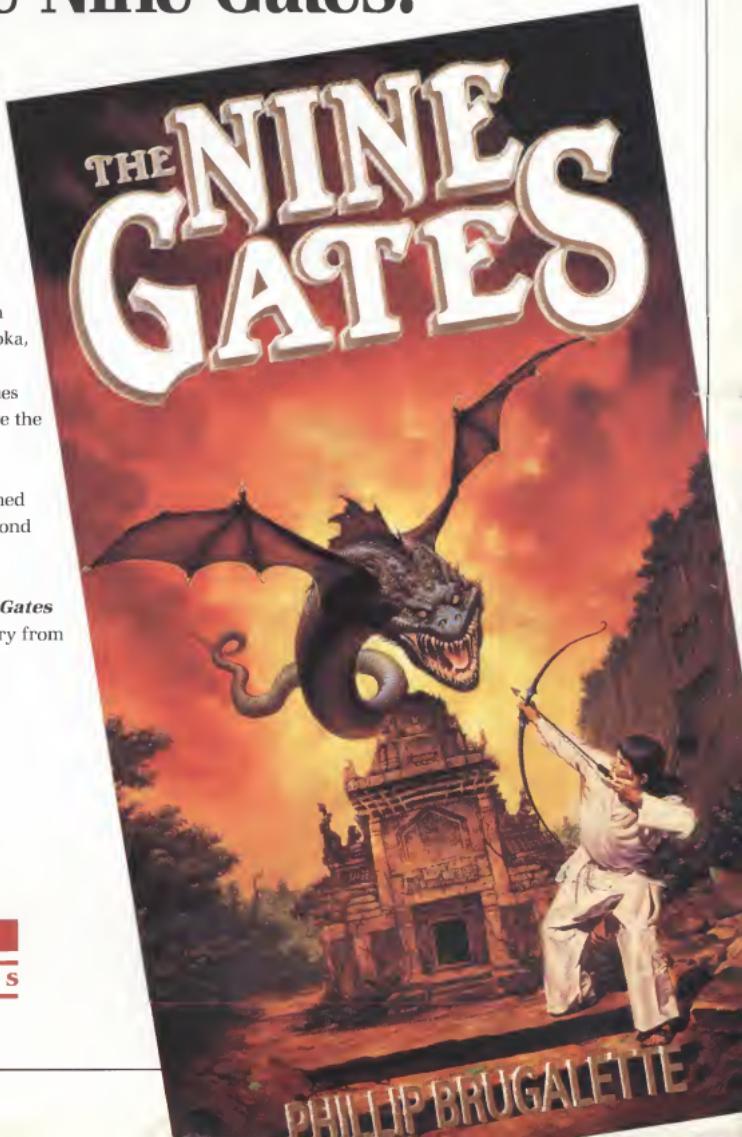
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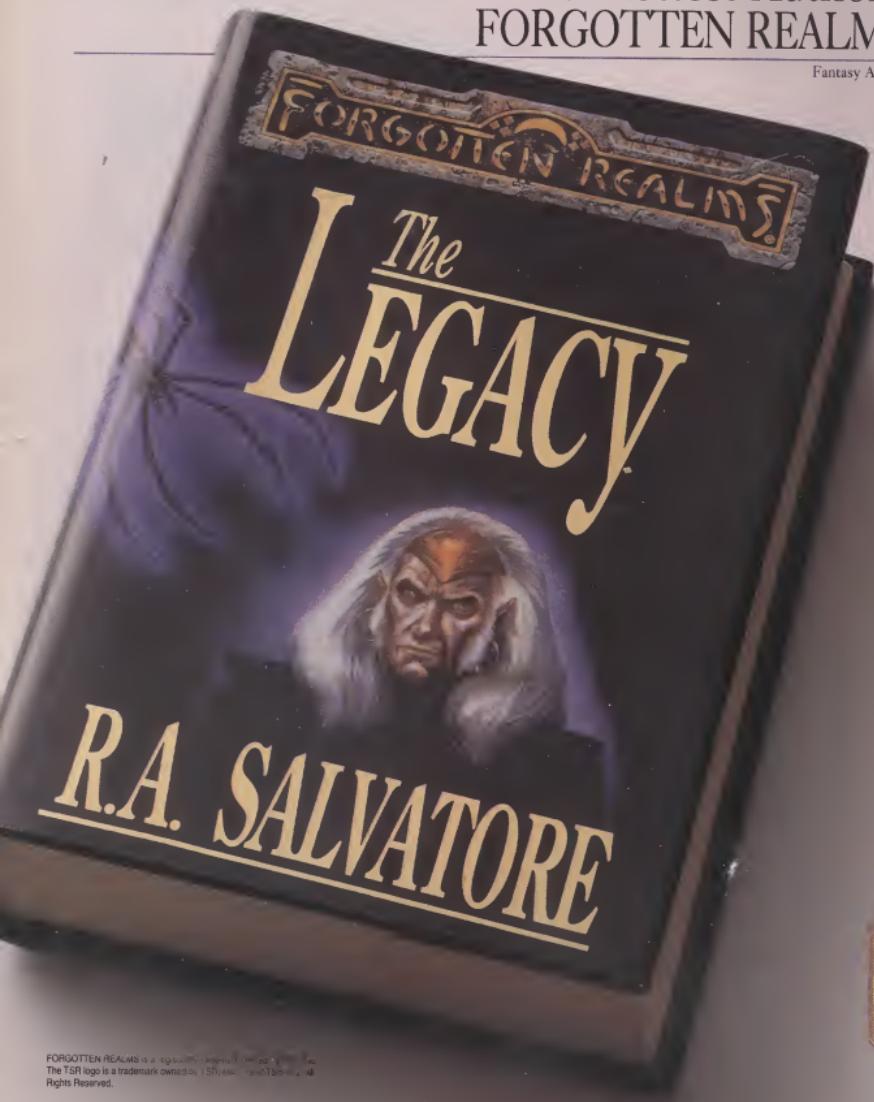


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